

# BANDWAGON

JULY-AUGUST 2010





# BANDWAGON

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FRED D. PFENING, JR.

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

FRED D. PFENING III

MANAGING EDITOR

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## OUR COVERS

One of the circus's most enduring and iconic images is of a pretty girl with a horse. Dozens of lithographs depict this theme. The poster on this month's cover is one of the most beautiful variations. Printed by the Strobbridge Lithographing Company of Cincinnati for the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth in 1897, it is remarkable on many counts. While a female rider was standard issue on posters of the time, a female clown and ringmistress were definitely not. The unknown artist's use of perspective gives the bill a sense of depth rarely found on other circus lithographs, which usually appear to be two-dimensional and flat. The setting is European, perhaps in one of the continent's many circus buildings. There is no ring, let alone three, only a circular barrier behind which sit apparitions of audience members.

The aesthetic quality of the poster is far superior to others of the period, or any era for that matter. It has a post-impressionist sensibility reminiscent of the great French music hall broadsides of the time, or even Edgar Degas's superlative circus paintings.

It is one of the most elegant images to ever come off Strobbridge's presses. A Ringling female rider, horse and clown half-sheet from 1896 is the only other bill that matches this poster in artistic magnificence. Either is arguably the finest surviving example of circus art. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

The one-sheet, text-only woodblock poster on the back cover dates from 1886. Probably written by press agent Charles Stow, the bill is a masterpiece of the bill writer's art, full of the bombast and exaggeration expected of circus advertising. "A Glorious Feast for Nothing," "Free as Air to Rich and

Poor Alike," and "Beyond conception" are among its many memorable phrases. How could the denizens of Kokomo, Indiana, then a town of 4000 souls, resist such wonders? Pfening Archives.

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**Frederic Denver Pfening, Jr.**  
29 March 1925—6 September 2010

Fred D. Pfening, Jr. passed away as this issue was nearing completion. An obituary and tribute to *Bandwagon's* Editor and Publisher of forty-nine years will appear in the September-October issue.



# An Interview With John Herriott

By Dale Riker

*The following interview was graciously transcribed by Evelyn Riker.*

Dale Riker: This is an interview with John Herriott taped on the 19th of March, 1996 in his home in Sarasota, Florida. John, we just thought that maybe we should start with your personal chronology. Your full name is . . .

Herriott: John Milton Herriott.

Riker: Tell us when you were born and where.

Herriott: January 15, 1931 in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Riker: And where is St. Peter, Minnesota?

Herriott: St. Peter is the home of five governors in the state of Minnesota; it was the first capitol of the state of Minnesota; it's a small community about seventy miles south of Minneapolis-St. Paul; and it is the home of Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran College, so it's quite a little town.

Riker: All right. And your father's name was. . . ?

Herriott: Milton Lindsay Herriott.

Riker: And your mother's name?

Herriott: Viola Rosalie Engesser was her maiden name.

Riker: Related to Gee Gee Engesser?

Herriott: Well, Gee Gee is my first cousin. That's the history of how I happened to be born in Minnesota.

Riker: Well, why don't you tell us the history of how you happened to be born in Minnesota?

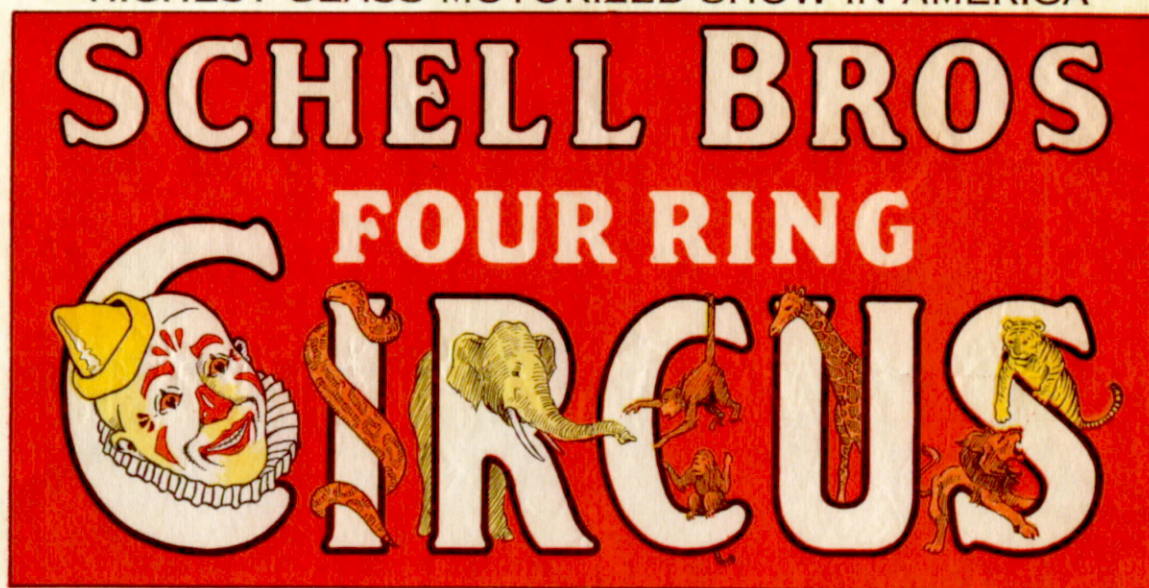
Zellmar Bros. letterhead from 1926, the year Milton Herriott married into the Engesser family. Circus World Museum collection.

Herriott: My uncle, George Engesser, was of a family of eleven children, he was the oldest son, and my mother was the third youngest. My great-grandfather started the first brewery in southern Minnesota, and he came from Cincinnati, Ohio. They were German people, and they were German immigrants in Cincinnati, which is a predominately German area. He moved up to St. Peter, Minnesota and started a brewery; he was a businessman and he started in an industrial area there and whatever they called the land, and kind of made the city and the community and so on. He had eleven children, my grandmother was an immigrant from Germany, and he was a prosperous man and the children were all educated and they picked a certain vocation. My great grandpa, he had five children and my grandfather, John Engesser, was a businessman and he had eleven children, and he was tied in with the brewery with his brothers after their father died; but he then went in the dry goods business, but he raised eleven children. Some of them went to college if they wanted to. My mother was a hair dresser by trade, or she went to school. My Uncle George, Gee Gee's father, was musically inclined and he was a great piano player. He became a song plugger in the local music store; when the people bought sheet music in those days they had to have a song plugger play the songs because there were no recordings. And then he played at the local movie theater for the silent pictures, with the piano background music. Then he met some show people vaudeville was popular, and the Chautauqua, and he went out as a piano player. He developed an piano act in vaudeville, and then he met my Aunt Vates, she and her sister were the Swenson sisters, a





HIGHEST CLASS MOTORIZED SHOW IN AMERICA



GEORGE E. ENGESSER

OWNER AND MANAGER

WINTER QUARTERS: ST. PETER, MINN.

ENROUTE \_\_\_\_\_

George Engesser, John Herriott's uncle, changed the name of his circus to Schell Bros. in 1929. By then, the circus claimed it had 54 trucks. Pfening Archives.

dancing act in vaudeville, and so he got in vaudeville and then they got in the rep show business. They had their own rep show and would play community and village halls and auditoriums. He bought a tent and took this rep show out with a tent. He did a lot of the old (we have some of scripts, yet) rep shows. (Riker: Toby shows?) Yeah, he did the Swede comedian; he was a German but he was established and very popular in Minnesota, Wisconsin, the Dakotas and so on, Ole Olson from Wisconsin. He had a number of what he called "Ole" shows. They had "Ole's Best Day," "Let Ole Do It," and various things. He had three brothers and they all operated Ole shows. He was very successful with them and he had this tent and had this elephant, and he was a pretty sharp fellow in advertising and lithographs and papering and sending out couriers and heralds and stuff like that.

So he got this elephant and stopped doing the rep show and did a circus. He then advertised for an animal trainer and my father was a young fellow and had started around the Mighty Haag Show and his background had been with various circuses as a horse or elephant hand, etc. He answered the ad for my Uncle George's circus and became the equestrian director and the elephant and horse trainer. Mother traveled with the circus, and they met and they got married.

So, my father was an only child and his mother was a prosperous business woman. She was in the hotel business. She and my grandfather on the Herriott side would go to various cities in the western states and they would operate the leading hotel. My grandfather was a chef and meat cutter by trade. So they then would operate the hotel and the dining room, and my father was just an afterthought as a child, and he grew up living in hotel rooms. They were in Bartlesville, Oklahoma and they were in var-

ious places and ended up in Globe, Arizona. They had the hotel there and my father was a young boy, and not having any siblings, or any normal upbringing, he liked animals; so he would keep cats and dogs and things in back of the hotel, in the livery area. Eventually he got a pony, a mule, and a burro, and so on. When he got to be about 11, 12 or 13 years old, he started running away from home and he joined the Clyde Reyaldo Dog and Pony Show as a dog boy. Then he joined the Jones Bros. & Wilson Circus; I think he was around sixteen or seventeen at the time. You could check that historically, when that circus was out.

Then he went on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus as a bull hand; he was on the Al. G. Barnes as a young apprentice; he was on the Sells-Floto Circus, I think he said in 1921, and William Wells was the equestrian director and Leo Hamilton was the assistant equestrian director. I'll give you a little history now, maybe my years are wrong, but my father said that when H. B. Gentry bought the

Sells-Floto circus for Jerry Mugivan, because Tammen and Bonfils didn't want to sell it to a grift operator, so they used H. B. Gentry as a creditable, well recognized and well thought of circus man. He bought the circus for Mugivan; he had had the Gentry Bros. dog and pony shows, which we know, and

Milton Herriott, equestrian director and horse trainer on the Mills Bros. Circus at Westmont, Illinois on 14 July 1943. Pfening Archives.





William Wells was one of the great dog and pony trainers on the various Gentry shows and holdings. So H. B. Gentry then put William Wells in as equestrian director, which was a responsible job on a circus like Sells-Floto. Leo Hamilton was a young assistant equestrian director, and my father said Leo Hamilton worked a collie and monkey act in one ring and my dad worked the collie dog and monkey act in the other end ring in the animal display.

Then he went with Christy Bros. Circus and he got to be more of an animal trainer there, working with elephants and so on. He and Terrell Jacobs were young apprentice fellows there in those days, and they had a life-long friendship. When Dolly Jacobs was in a roller skating act when she and Terrell got married and Dolly is a Minneapolis girl. Anyway, from Christy, he went to the Mighty Haag Circus. Then he married a woman, he was on the John Robinson Circus, and then he was working under Robert Thornton, who was equestrian director. He worked ponies and rode manège, the things that young apprentice trainers would do. The wife he married fell from the trapeze on the John Robinson Circus; her name was Mary. I don't know much about her—that was before . . . anyway, that was in about 1924.

Riker: No children of that marriage?

Herriott: No. She fell and got busted up awful bad, terrible, in Birmingham, Alabama. I read that in *Billboard* when I was in Baraboo [performing at Circus World Museum]. I used to get the old *Billboards* from Paul Luckey and I would read them during the day while waiting [to perform]. I remember my dad didn't talk much about his first wife. Another thing, his christened name was Herriott. When he was a young boy in Globe, Arizona, my grandfather was an alcoholic, and they divorced. He was a southerner and he went back to Alabama or some southern state. My grandmother stayed there, and it was an interesting thing; that was in the silver mining boom in Globe, Arizona, and the man that was a permanent resident in her hotel was a United State Marshall named John Grimes. My grandmother and him got married and he adopted my father, so my father went by the name of Grimes, and in all these early years in his circus career any thing in the *Billboard* related to "Milton Grimes," that was my father. He would write in to the *Billboard*, he was a scribe, he liked that, and he would write in various things. So, anyway, he was going by this name Milton Grimes. He had . . . I see that so clearly because I was born in the circus, so to speak, but I see that with a lot of these young elephant trainers especially, they will go and work on Ringling, or they will go with Beatty, and they'll work for Gunther [Gebel-Williams] or Freddie Logan or Axel [Gauthier] or Hugo [Schmitt], whoever it happens to be, and then they get a little ambitious and will go with a little show, a Hoxie, or some small show where they can be the trainer and work the elephant. It looks like my dad's career kind of went that way. He would go around the Hagenbeck-Wallace show. He told me he worked for Bert Noyes, who was the elephant trainer. Then he went and worked for Austin King on the Al G. Barnes Circus [as] a horse trainer; then he went to the Honest Bill Show. Honest Bill Newton, Moon Bros., and Globe Bros. in Quenemo, Kansas, and Honest Bill

had him train an eight pony drill. So here's a young guy and he's having his opportunity, and we have a letter he wrote my grandmother and he said, "I'm working for Mr. Newton in Quenemo, Kansas in the winter quarters and I'm training these eight ponies. Mr. Newton is going to have me do something different with the ponies. They're going to work without harness." That just meant that Honest Bill was too cheap to buy harness for the ponies. And he also said in the letter that Mr. Newton was buying him a tuxedo. So you see, he was just a young guy who didn't have anything.

Well, then he went on the Mighty Haag Circus and the Haag family treated him pretty well. He liked them, Ernest Haag, and he had a lifelong friendship with the Haag family. A little history here on circus mud show people; the American circus people.

The Silverlake family: Brownie, Jimmy, Mel . . . well, their father was Brownie Silverlake. And Ernest Haag had a son, Harry, and a daughter, Helen who had the chimp act. What happened, the Silverlake family, Brownie Silverlake's wife, mother of Jimmy and Mel and all the Silverlakes that are my age, so to speak, her father was a veterinarian in Medora, Indiana; and also, Harry Haag married her sister Ruby . . . follow me, now, Mrs. Silverlake and Harry Haag's wife Ruby were sisters. So the Silverlake family is part relation of the Haag family. My dad was there as a very young man; I don't think he was married then, back in 1923 or so. If you recall Ethel Joyce, Walter Jennier's wife, well, she was kind of an orphan that was raised by Ernest Haag and his wife. Then she learned how to be a performer on the Mighty Haag Circus, and later she met Walter Jennier and his family. Roy and Walter Jennier did a double trap act. Their mother . . . they had a little circus years ago, tiny little show; in fact, Walter Jennier told me they played Fort Myers with their little tiny circus, they stayed out all winter. All those shows, they never closed, they stayed out all winter. And he said that Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison came to their little family circus in Fort Myers, Florida.

So, anyway, my father became quite fond of the Haags; he was only around there a couple of seasons and after his wife fell on the John Robinson Circus in Birmingham, Alabama, they were destitute. She was in the hospital, broken up and seriously hurt, and he wrote into the *Billboard* and related . . . there was no workmen's compensation, if you got hurt, that was so long . . . he said that Robert Thornton was very nice to him. He stayed in Birmingham, Alabama and then Bob Thornton got him a job selling tickets, after she was out of intensive care, or whatever, she still had to stay and recuperate. Dad went back on the circus, some way he got a job selling tickets. He had left the show and they had replaced his job,

The 1937 Barney Bros. Circus, a small trucker, was the first show Herriott could remember being with. He was six years old. Pfening Archives.





or whatever. He stayed there a few weeks and then went back on the Mighty Haag Circus. He could make more money. So he and his wife got back together again, and then he went with the Seils-Sterling Circus, the Lindemanns from Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He was divorced from this first wife after everything. And Bill Lindemann was the oldest brother, there was Pete, Al and Bill's wife Millie. My father was a nice man, I'm not bragging, he was always a gentleman, he was a neat fellow, so people would take a liking to him. He was aggressive, he worked hard, so he made a lifelong friendship with the Lindemanns. I think that was before Seils-Sterling, they had a show they called Yankee American that was a fore-runner of the Seils-Sterling Circus. And they had a little male elephant that was quite a popular elephant in his day named Billy Sunday; he was dwarf male elephant and had been on the Sells-Floto Circus and then they bought him. That was their first elephant. He was a tough little elephant and my dad went there and handled him well, and he trained the elephant, pony and dog act with Billy Sunday. They worked the season and then he would go out in the wintertime and do a little vaudeville, or indoor type dates with him.

So that was his career up until he joined my uncle's Zellmar or Schell Bros. Circus. My uncle had two different titles he operated these circuses under over different years. He met my mother and my mother said that they went on their first date and my dad said to her that he wanted her to be his steady girl friend. Well, she was taken aback a little because this was only their first date. He was a serious fellow. So he did court her. Now, my grandfather and grandmother were back in Minnesota, so she was there and my Uncle George was kind of her guardian. My father was an only child and he sees this family. There were a lot of Engessers. My Uncle Harold was on the show, my Uncle Ollie, my Uncle John was the general agent, and the sisters were involved. My Aunt Ruth was in charge of mailing the heralds and handling the mailing lists, and various things. So he saw that this was a big family and he proposed to my mother, but he asked my Uncle George for her hand in marriage; this was the proper thing. If the father wasn't there, he asked the oldest brother. My Uncle George liked him very much and they were very pleased, and so he told my mother that when they married he would like to have children and a family. And he said, "You know, my birth name was Herriott and when we marry, I want to change my name back to Herriott, because I don't feel that if we raise a family I want them under a name different than Grimes." Which was wonderful, I'm so pleased he did that. It was interesting, because after many, many years, I traced through some people that contacted me, the Herriott family tree back to Scotland. It's just fantastic, and my great-great-great-grandfather came to this country in 1685 and settled in Perth Amboy, Piscataway, and Woodbridge, New Jersey. Fantastic family background. And I've got all the records from the Herriotts; we had a tri-centennial in 1985 in Lexington, Kentucky. They had settled across through there, and fabulous. And I would never have known this had my father not changed his name back and he was the only child. I have never had a son, so that's kind of the end of the Herriotts on my side, and I only have a sister. I have a sister that's a year and a half older than I am.

So when my father married my mother, he stayed with my Uncle George's circus up until about 1931 when I was born. My father was the director of the Longfellow Zoological Garden in Minneapolis for two or three years. After that, he went back with the Seils-Sterling Circus and worked there, but we didn't travel with it. We had a little home in Minnesota.

In 1937, I was six years old and my Uncle George's wife, my

Aunt Vates, she had a brother who had been in vaudeville too, and he took the name of Carl Devere, which would be more of a stage name. And he and John Foss bought the Barney Brothers Circus. John Foss was a part owner that circus, and they leased an elephant from my Uncle George and my father went there as horse trainer, elephant trainer, equestrian director, and we went on and traveled. That was the first circus I remember traveling with. So we stayed there most of that season with the Barney Brothers Circus. My father over the years had developed . . . as I said, he was quite a scribe. He would write people and

he had gotten to know Dr. Mann, director of the National Zoo in Washington, who was a charter Circus Fan down there. And Dr. Mann got my father a civil service appointment and we moved to Washington, D. C. and my father went to work in the National Zoo. We were there for two years, a wonderful two years; but my mother was a Minnesota girl and she hated Washington . . . even in those days Washington was quite a city. So we lived in apartments in a fairly nice area of Washington. My dad was at the National Zoo and Eleanor Roosevelt used to ride her horse every morning through the Zoo, that's where she did her horseback riding. Dr. Mann was a wonderful man. His wife's name was Lucy, they had an apartment right out by the zoo grounds, and we were kids, my sister and I, we went there frequently and every time there was a circus around, Dr. Mann he loved it. So we went to see Downie Bros. Circus back in the heyday of that circus, and we went to see Ringling Bros. when they opened there under canvas.

We saw the Tim McCoy show when it went broke in Washington. And I vividly remember so much of that, and it's interesting. Bob Parkinson, when I was in Baraboo a number of years ago, that's before video tapes, and Bob said to me one night in his basement that he was going to show some late circus movies that they would get as a collection, and we're sitting there watching Dr. Mann's movies! Now Dr. Mann was affluent, the director of the National Zoo, a great national politician, well known fellow, great politician, that's why he kept getting the money for the zoo. But, anyway, we're watching these movies and here's the Ringling Bros. Circus and I said to Bob Parkinson, "Bob, you won't believe this, I was sitting right with Dr. Mann when he took those movies, I remember it well, sitting right there in the seats by him." And it was Terrell Jacobs and his lions, and Frank "Bring 'Em Back Alive" Buck, the big spec with the Ubangis, and so on. And then later we showed the Tim McCoy show. Same thing, movies on the lot that my dad and I . . . my dad was great, he always took me with him and we went out to the Tim McCoy show with Dr. Mann.

Another thing Dr. Mann did, he had a lunch room in the National Zoo and he would bring all the big shots that he felt were important and they would serve them crocodile steaks, or exotic things, you know, and it was quite a thing to be a guest of Dr. Mann for



Dr. William Mann, the director of the National Zoo in Washington, hired Milton Herriott in 1938. Mann was a great circus fan, and took the young John Herriott to many circuses when the family lived in Washington. Pfening Archives.





FORD & KOUGH  
Owners and Managers

## FORD AND KOUGH CIRCUS

*The Show Beautiful - Scintillating  
Spectacular Pageant of America*



General Offices and Winter Quarters  
Austin, Minnesota

The Herriott family was with the Ford and Kough Circus about 1941. The show was angeled by circus fan Garner Kough, an Austin, Minnesota businessman who bankrolled small-time showman Doc Ford in a tiny truck show. The young Herriott clowned on this trick. Pfening Archives.

luncheon at the National Zoo, for BIG politicians. I recall one time my dad attended a Circus Fan party that he held there in honor of Sir Cedric Hardwicke, the movie star, who was the president of the Circus Fans in England at that time. So he and Dr. Mann were friendly. But that was an interesting time.

Well then we left the National Zoo and moved back to Minnesota, and my dad in my hometown in the wintertime when everybody's broke, would get a job as a bartender, because he wasn't a drunk and he was a clean, neat, presentable person. The Nicolet House was in St. Peters in Nicolet County, and the people that operated the leading hotel, the Nicolet House, were Norwegian people named Annexstad and they were very formal hotel-keepers of the old type. They liked my father, and every time he came home in the wintertime, he would be the bartender at the Nicolet House. Then he would go back out on the road with various shows.

In 1939 he also bought a bunch of dogs and ponies and in our backyard at our home he trained a dog and pony act. He figured that's what we were going to do, and so we did go out and we worked various fairs. We had a little incident with a tiny circus we went with called Crazy Paul's Tent Show, owned by Paul Zallee from Pekin, Illinois. He's noted in circus circles; he was a clown, he did a juggling act, and he always liked to run a little circus. It was a rep show when we joined it, a 60 foot top with a 30 foot middle, and it was called Crazy Paul's Tent Show. We arrived with a dog and pony act, a pick-out pony, a whip cracking act, and various things, so he changed it to Zallee Brothers Circus. We joined him in Elkhorn, Iowa, in like early June, I suppose, and the show didn't do any business. It was a terrible disaster, and business got so bad that he couldn't pay my father; and then it got so bad he gave my father half interest in the show, and then it got so bad my father had to give him his half interest back because he couldn't afford to stay there. But we were always friendly with Paul Zallee all through the years, and he ended up in Pekin as a deacon in the church, and I'm a Mason and he was very involved in the Masonic Lodge, and

when I was in Baraboo he used to write me letters and he was about 85 or 90 years old.

Then we went with the show that went out of Austin, Minnesota called Ford and Kough. There was a big Circus Fan in Austin, Minnesota named Garner Kough and he had a taxicab company and a moving van company in Austin. On the side of his moving van trucks he had a globe had "The World Moves and So Does Kough" written on it. But he was quite a big Circus Fan of that era and he got a guy named Doc

Ford, Doctor Ford, an old medicine show guy, and they took a circus called Ford and Kough Circus. They hired us and we went to Austin, Minnesota. Garner Kough had two white horses, and because of the Hormel Packing Company, he named the horses Spic and Spam. My dad trained those horses and I clowned. I had a little pig. Every clown is supposed to have a little pig, I guess. My mother was a good seamstress and she made me beautiful little clown suits and I was a white faced clown.

So that show went broke, and then we went with a carnival called the Friske Greater Shows up in northern Minnesota and North Dakota, and they provided us with a little tent in the front. . . the carnival would always have a front, with light bulbs in it, and we put on a little circus show for a percentage. I remember that on one side of us was a red hot girl show. Boy, when they'd bally those girls out on that bally platform with the siren and all that business and a good talker, he'd turn those suckers for that girl show. And on the other side of us was a wrestling show where the "stick" comes out of the audience and they actually would fight on the bally stage. And then we'd come out and bally with a pony and a monkey and a dog, and we wouldn't draw flies. We got ten cents and I recall one time we turned two little kids in at ten cents apiece, and my dad give them their dimes back because we didn't have enough trying to do two and three shows a day. So that didn't work so well.

This transpired during 1939 and 1940, all these little shows and carnivals. We did Christmas shows for a fellow. Very popular in those days were the merchants' Christmas programs where we'd do it right out on the street, and then came Santa Claus, and he'd hand out bags of candy to the kids. Almost every community did

The Herriotts spent the 1942 and 1943 seasons on the Mills Bros. Circus, another small truck show. Pfening Archives.

## MILLS BROS. CIRCUS

WINTER QUARTERS: BOX 451, PAINSVILLE, OHIO

Enroute April 13th, 1942





that, and this Mr. Stanbury from Fort Dodge, Iowa was the promoter of . . . he had about five or six Christmas show units that went out, and my dad went there. You'd take the dogs and ponies and work right on the street, and you'd play a whole route, starting maybe toward the end of November right up until Christmas Eve, you'd go every day to a different town. Cold as hell out there trying to do the act right out on the street. Of course those people up in that country are used to cold weather. So we did that for two winters, we'd jump from St. Peter to Fort Dodge, Iowa and then go out from there.

In 1941 the war started and my dad just got terrified about what would happen with the show business in wartime. He knew there would be rationing and all of these various things. He was kind of a, what would the word be, he looked at it as a prophet of doom, or something like that. That was exactly the wrong approach, because that was when everybody got rich, during the war.

Well, Mills Bros. Circus had started out and they didn't own any animals. They had run an ad in *Billboard*, I guess, or my dad put an ad in to sell these animals, or whatever. So Jack Mills came clear to St. Peter, Minnesota and he bought the dogs, the ponies, the goat, the monkey, and he bought the truck that my dad hauled them in, and everything. Then when they got back to Ohio—I think they wintered in Circleville or one of those towns in those days—he contacted my dad and we went on Mills Bros. Circus. My dad was the equestrian director and he worked those animals. The Rossi family was there that year, and the Powel family; anyway, we were there in 1942 and 1943.

Now, I'm growing up now; I'm getting to be . . . in 1941 I was ten years old, and in 1942 on Mills Bros. I worked a little dog and pony act in one end ring, a riding monkey and dog. They had manege horses and I rode a manege horse, and we did a rope cracking act in the concert, and soon. . . .

Riker: Did your dad have the concert?

Herriott: No, a guy named Clyde Weidner who was a cowboy, he was a pretty good Wild West man. No, we just did a whip cracking act. Clyde was from Lafayette, Indiana. His wife and daughter were Wild West people and they did trick riding, trick roping, and rope spinning. I rode for the horse roping and so on.

Then in 1944, the Kelly-Miller Circus . . . they had done very

Herriott spent some of his childhood living in Hugo, Oklahoma when his parents were on the Kelly-Miller Circus in the mid-1940s. At the time the show was owned by Obert Miller, shown here with wife Mary on their wedding day, 1 June 1953. Pfening Archives.



good business in 1942 and 1943. They were a small, small circus. That winter of 1943, Obert Miller put ad in the *Billboard* for a trainer to train some horses. They didn't have any horses with the circus, strictly a dog and pony show. And my dad answered the ad. But in 1926, I believe, Obert Miller had a dog and pony act on my Uncle George's circus. So they all knew each other. I got a nice picture of my Uncle George and Obert Miller on Uncle George's show. Obert Miller, if you ever knew him, was a slight, little man with a pointed nose, and [his son] Dore [Miller] now that he's lost weight, looks exactly like his dad. But, anyway, Obert loved animals; he was a dog and pony trainer himself. We went to Hugo, Oklahoma. That was the first winter they had wintered in Hugo. Before that I think they had wintered in Mena, Arkansas. But they had bought this nice little place in Hugo. There was a beautiful white frame house and two nice little white barns in the back. Very pretty little place. We went there, we had a house trailer and we parked our trailer. We were the only other people in winter quarters, and we parked right beside the house. Kelly Miller and his wife Dale and their daughter Karen, they lived in the house, and Dore was in the Army and Isla was in Smith Center, Kansas, that's their hometown in the winter. Then Isla came down later before we opened the season. Obert lived in the garage, he was not married at that time; he had a bed in the garage, and he sewed the big top himself. Now my mother was a very hard working German woman; she was a good cook and she was a worker, so my mother sewed all the sidewall. She sat with Obert and my dad trained the white and palomino horses that Dory Miller worked later; and they had one big elephant named Tina. They only had the one elephant. In 1943 Bud Anderson leased the elephants India and Bunny to Kelly-Miller the year before. He didn't have India and Bunny available for 1944, I think she [Laurie Anderson, Norman's mother] said they leased them to Arthur Bros. Circus. When we got there they had one elephant; they had these white and palomino horses my dad trained, and he trained the pony drill and he trained a bunch of manege horses. I remember Kelly Miller would get up in the morning and go to the post office, and we'd either ride with him or ride the school bus (my sister and I went to school in Hugo) and then I'd come home from school and help my dad train the animals in the afternoon and on the weekends. The elephant's name was Tina, and I found out her real name was LaTena and she was named after the wife of Andrew Downie out of Havre de Grace, Maryland. Downie got this baby elephant on that circus and they named her LaTena. Anyway, she ended up being called Tina. I read in an old *Billboard* that a guy named Sidney Rink, a black elephant trainer from the Al G. Barnes Circus, trained this elephant when she was a baby. She was mean, and Obert Miller was the only one who could get around her; she was a mean elephant. Every day Mr. Miller would take her . . . now this is exactly where Carson & Barnes' winter quarters are now . . . this was just before they built all their bunkhouses, but that was just a pretty little house with white fences, a very pretty little place, and they hadn't had any time to build other buildings or anything. So the one building the elephant stayed in and I remember Johnny Grady painted sideshow banners and they built seat boards, and whatever you do in winter quarters. The other barn is where they kept the horses, ponies and so on. [Side one of tape ends at this point and some of Herriott's comments are lost.]

Herriott: Norman [Anderson] talks about the elephant Susie Q that his father Bud leased after he sold his circus and when he went out in the 1940s; well, Norman said he didn't recall who owned the elephant. The elephant was owned by a guy named R. J. Richards, and he owned about three elephants, and he was the



uncle of Franco Richards of Ring Brothers fame and Trapeze Brothers fame. The elephant that R.J. Richards had was named Susie Q, and that's the first baby elephant I ever saw. When we were wintering in Hugo with the Kelly-Miller Circus that winter, he stopped there and he had a straight job truck and he had this baby elephant in there, and she was maybe 4-1/2 or 5 feet tall and she was trained. I was awed by elephants, Oh God, something about elephants just mystified me; I was just crazy for them. So he unloaded this elephant named Susie Q and she did a hind leg stand and she did a headstand. I never saw an elephant stand on her head! WOW. I thought that was really something. So, anyway, I never forgot Susie Q. Well, Norman tells about her and that's the same elephant, Susie Q. R.J. Richards either died and his nephew Franco Richards got those elephants. There was Susie Q and Bonnie. Well when I was the elephant trainer on Hoxie Brothers, I had those elephants, Sue and Bonnie. Here's the elephant I first saw in 1944, now she had only one eye, but she was still a wonderful performing elephant.

This kind of brings Bud Anderson into the picture and during those years my Uncle George had out his Schell Bros. and Zellmar Bros. were the same years that Bud Anderson had out Seal Bros. and, later, that Jungle Oddities. So all American circus people get to know each other. My dad and Bud Anderson were very good friends.

The Henry family had an old wagon show years ago, J. E. Henry Circus, and he had a number of sons, Bum Henry, his name was Arthur; Cliff Henry; Glen Henry; Todd Henry; and there was a daughter, Bertha Henry. They did rolling globe and juggling and all kinds of small circus acts, because all those kids grew up on their father's circus. And probably the historians would relate because that's the circus that had the elephant that the band rode on in the parade. They had a big howdah and they had a six piece band that rode on the elephant. They've got some wonderful pictures of that in Baraboo.

Anyway, all these Henrys would contract with various mud shows and they were on Uncle George's show and they were on Bud Anderson's show, and various shows like that. The sister Bertha married a guy named Al Connors who did a wonderful tight wire act and juggling, and so on. He had a son, Jimmie Connors, and that family all ended up in Gainesville, Texas. They went out when they first started that Gainesville Community Circus, and the third generation, Gary Henry, was a good friend of Bobby Gibbs'. His wife Zoanne did the Roman standing on Hoxie Bros. when we were there.

My Uncle George went broke in 1937. My Uncle John was his general agent and he went on the Russell Bros. Circus, and my cousin, Gee Gee, had an older sister called Baby Vates, her name was Vates as well, very beautiful girl and multi-talented. Just a beautiful woman, and when my uncle was doing well with his circus in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he wintered for two years out in southern California in the Los Angeles area. He spent \$40,000 to make my cousin Baby Vates into a movie star. She was very talented and she made a couple of movies, one was *Swing High* and one was some other circus type movie. She married a man in Beverly Hills. His family owned the Gramophone Company, which manufactured the forerunners of our tape players today. He left his family out there and traveled with her on the circus. When the show went broke and things went bad, he and my cousin went on the, I think, Bud Anderson's show or the Russell Bros. Circus and he sold banners. Years ago on every little circus there was a heel and toe banner man, and the most famous of them was a guy named Buck Reager. Buck ended up on the Kelly-Miller

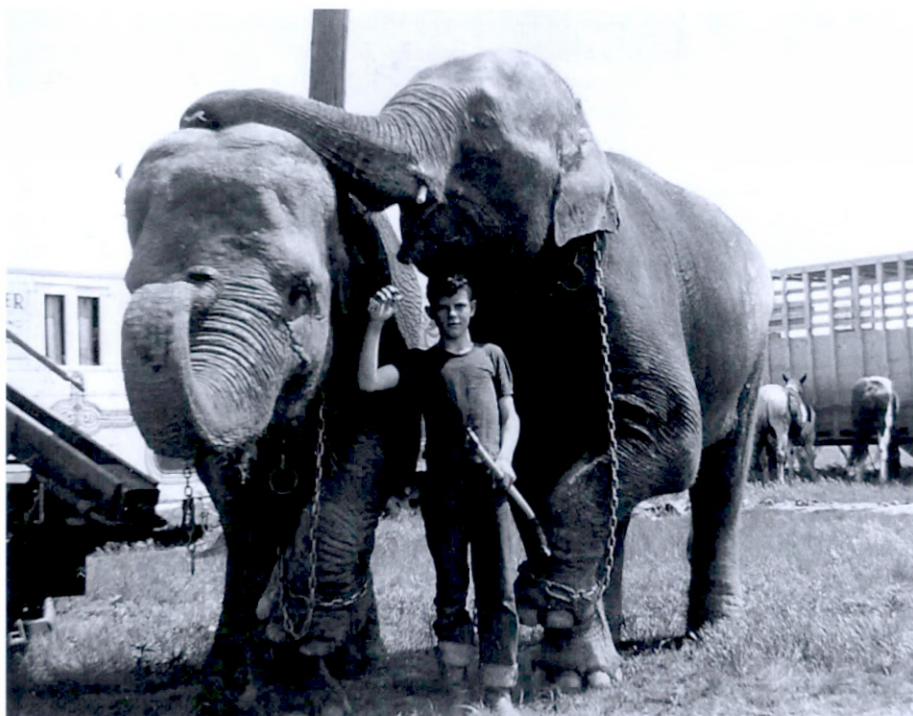
show, but he was on my Uncle George's show. He was the guy who would come in on the morning of circus day and sell the gas station and the paint company and all that. In 1948, I went out and sold banners on the Kelly-Miller show for Buck Reager, but that's a later story.

Riker: We were talking about you going out to Hugo with your father and about Obert Miller in the garage putting the tent together, if you want to go back.

Herriott: Okay. So we were in winter quarters in Hugo, Oklahoma and every day Mr. Miller would take this big elephant Tina and lead her down in the back. They had a lot of land there and they still do, and he'd chain her to a different tree every day. He had a long drag chain so she could eat grass out there. I would follow Obert Miller around. I was just awed by this elephant. He'd say to me, "Johnnie, you stay back now, she's a little mean, you know." He'd let me follow along but he'd caution me, "You stay back now." And every day, boy, I'd go with Mr. Miller before I went to school, and then in the afternoon when I got home from school and he'd go down, I'd go with Mr. Miller. Same thing, he'd take this elephant . . . he was a cute little man, Obert Miller, and a hard working little fellow. So now, Obert Miller and my dad . . . every Wednesday the *Billboard* came, so every Wednesday night my dad would go in the house and he and Obert Miller would love to read the *Billboard*. Obert was always looking for something for sale, he'd look in the Classifieds. So he saw where George Christy, who had the Christy Bros. Circus that was not on the road any more, he was in South Houston, Texas . . . in fact, he was the mayor of South Houston, and he had advertised a high school horse for sale, plus some surplus equipment. So Obert said to my dad, "Boy that sounds good. If we could buy that high school horse cheap." It was a black stallion and was a nice horse. Then he and his son Kelly would go down and look at some other circus equipment, a sideshow tent or something like that, I can't remember what. So my dad and Kelly Miller get in a car and go to South Houston to look at this horse and this other surplus circus equipment. About three days later they pull back in and they've got two semi trucks, one of them has a eight black and white spotted liberty horse act in it, and a black high school horse. In another one there's all kinds of circus equipment and paraphernalia. Well, Mr. Miller was very tight with a dollar and he was fit to be tied. He said to son Kelly, "What in the hell?" Well, they thought it was a good deal and a good price, so now, we've got this beautiful black and white spotted horse act. It was a good act and was trained by this guy named Merritt Belew, whom my dad had apprenticed under when he was on the Christy Circus. It was an excellent liberty horse act. Incidentally, when my dad was on the Christy show and the Mighty Haag show, Everett James was the band leader and Harry James, the trumpet player, was a little boy and my dad used to lead the elephant in spec and little Harry rode in the cart the elephant pulled. But that's just another sidelight.

So now we've got all these other animals in winter quarters and now Obert comes to my dad and said, "Milt, I have to go up on some business in Smith Center, Kansas, for a few days. Would you take that elephant and look after her and take her down and chain her to those trees?" Well, she was a mean elephant, nobody could handle her, so my dad said, yeah, he would. My dad was an experienced man with elephants, so now I'm curious; I'm getting up in the morning and wondering how my dad's going to do this. So I follow my dad out, and he goes in that shed where the elephant was, she was a great big elephant, and he had a pitchfork and he walked up to her and she took a swipe at him and he jabbed her right in by her ear with that pitchfork, and took his elephant hook





Thirteen year old Johnny Herriott with two former Polack Bros. elephants on Kelly-Miller in 1944. Pfening Archives.

and whapped her on the head a few times, and marched her down and chained her to the tree. That was it. So just that authority and the way he went about it, she knew not to mess with this guy.

Now we're getting close to going on the road about the end of February. We went there right after Christmas, and now they made a deal. The Polack Circus had two elephants for sale, Marianne and Mona, and they were on the Polack Indoor Circus, and Mickey King was styling the act. She was Antoinette Concello's sister. Cheerful Gardener had been there, and I don't recall who was working the elephants at the time, but anyway, they sold them. I think Kelly Miller or maybe my dad went up to where the Polack show was and they brought those two elephants back to winter quarters. So now we had Marianne, Mona and Tina, we had three elephants. So we were about two weeks before we were going to go on the road on a Wednesday night; my dad goes in after supper, my mother cooked in the trailer, we had a very tiny trailer, and now I was twelve years old and my sister was thirteen, so it was not a . . . that was at the age where brothers and sisters should certainly not be sleeping together, it would be too familiar. But Mr. Miller lived in this garage and there was a stairway and a little attic over this garage, and my mother went up there and made me a little room. I had a cot and a little footlocker or trunk, boy I thought I was riding in high cotton. I had my own little place to live up there. There wasn't a window in the place. I never knew whether it was daylight or dark. I had a little lamp. So on this Wednesday night, we ate supper and it looked stormy out, really bad clouds, and you get those bad storms in March and April in Oklahoma and Kansas. So we ate and my mother and sister were washing the dishes and my dad said, "I'm going to go in the house and read the *Billboard* with Obert." He went in and then he came out and said, "It looks pretty stormy, maybe we all ought to go in the house." So we did, and there was my mother, my father, my sister and myself and Kelly and Dale Miller and their daughter Karen Kay who was about three or four years old, and Obert. All of a sudden, somebody

said, "I hear a freight train coming," and there was no freight, no railroad tracks, and a tornado hit and it was horrendous. It picked our house trailer up and blew it clear down in the back of winter quarters. Fortunately, it never blew the house down or any of the barns; we all huddled under the arches in the doorways throughout the house, and my dad and Obert knew exactly . . . we didn't know what was happening, they knew exactly what it was—a tornado. The house next door, the barn had torn the roof. The next day in Hugo, we drove by houses turned over, twisted around. It was a horrible, horrible tornado. So here our house trailer is sitting about 150 feet down in this field, at least 150 feet; so they took the elephant Tina and the work harness and they tipped it up on end, it had rolled over, and the inside was unbelievable. It just tore it all to hell. So we pulled it back up to where it was and the sides were bashed in on it. So my mother and father and sister moved in the house with the Millers and I slept in my little attic. My mother took a butcher knife, a saw and a hammer, and she rebuilt that

house trailer herself and she did a magnificent job. It had leatherette siding on it, that's the way they made trailers in those days, and she took canvas and covered and painted it, just like the leatherette and she cut the bows, it was a rounded roof and on the inside she got the paneling or plywood, soaked it in water and bent it and made an unbelievable job. So we lived in that trailer and I remember when we got back to Minnesota that fall, my mother sold that trailer for \$800. Anyway, now I've been through this tornado, boy I was scared.

Riker: No animals got hurt? Didn't panic?

Herriott: Not a one. No panic. The little elephant was fine. We had a little guy who was boss canvasman on Kelly-Miller, he had been the boss canvasman on various mud shows through the years,

Milt Herriott with daughter Jean on Kelly-Miller Circus, 1944. Pfening Archives.





named Shorty Gilson, and he lived in a little upstairs in the barn, they had an upstairs in the barn that a few guys could bunk in there. He came up right after the thing. Oh, the lightning was horrendous after this tornado; God, it was horrible. No animals were hurt, but after that anytime there was thunder or a cloud in the sky, I would just panic. I would be up in my little attic and I'd hear the thunder at night and I'd be laying up there just terrified. Obert Miller would yell from downstairs in the garage, "Johnny, are you all right?" "Yeah, I'm all right, Mr. Miller." He'd say, "Would you like to come down here?" Boy, I'd bailout and I'd climb in bed with Mr. Miller.

Now we get on the road and Little Bob Stevens had the concessions, his wife was Lone Stevens, she's retired and still lives in Hugo. She's married now to a fellow named Donnie Macintosh from the Macintosh family. Little Bob was in the Army, too, just like Does Miller; but Does Miller came home, he got a two week furlough to come home for the opening. That's the first time I met D.R. or Does. And Little Bob got a furlough to come home, too, so he was there for the opening of the show. We opened about this time of the year in Durand, Oklahoma, which is common for 50 years ago, that's the same old town. We moved from Hugo over there and it was a muddy lot, that's typical for opening day. So I'm out there watching everything going on and my dad took the elephant Mary with a work harness and he was down pulling some stuff in the backyard, spotting some trailers or something, and Little Bob Stevens was spotting his concession equipment in the front and his concession truck was stuck. Now the elephant Tina is standing out there with a work harness on, and Little Bob is yelling, "I need an elephant, elephant, elephant." Well, I knew my dad was the only guy other than Obert who could work Tina, we didn't have any elephant hands. So I'm watching, watching, watching, and my dad's down there in the back yard, and Little Bob is yelling, "Elephant, elephant," and there's a bull hook hanging there by the truck, so I go and take this elephant bull hook and I unchain Tina and I pulled that concession truck. Now there's another truck stuck and another one, and pretty soon, about fifteen minutes into it, some way my mother was in the trailer and she looked out the window and she saw me with this Tina; oh my God, she became unglued. "That elephant will kill you." She was a tough one, and my dad . . . well, the damage was already done, I had been with her for about fifteen minutes and she worked for me, never took a slap at me or anything. So I worked her all season. I was like Toby Tyler, I was with that elephant at least twenty hours a day. I loved that. And I worked her in the show. So Kelly Miller came to me . . . my dad paid me \$5 a week as part of the Herriott Family, and I rode manege, worked the pony drill, and worked the dog act and, again, we did a whip cracking act in the concert, so those were my duties. So then Kelly came to me and they had a push-pull tent, they've always had a push-pull tent, and he said, "If you pull that tent up with the poles every morning, I'll give you a dollar a day to take Tina." So I got a buck a day, every day; that was seven dollars a week. That was two dollars more than I got for being a performer.

Well then Obert Miller came to me and said, "Johnnie, if you pull them poles out every night, I'll give you fifty cents." Obert wasn't quite as generous as Kelly. But Obert didn't know Kelly did and Kelly didn't know Obert did, so then I pulled them out at night for my fifty cents from Obert Miller. I remember every Sunday, Kelly would come and give me seven one dollar bills; then Obert would come and give me seven fifty cent pieces, and then my dad would give me my five bucks. All the house trailers had little tanks, not a fancy water tank, but they had little tanks where

you pump them to pump water; and if there was a spigot around, I would fill up the tanks for the Rossi family, and for Lone Stevens, and our house, and then I'd get a quarter or something like that. So I was doing pretty good.

But I loved those elephants. I loved that elephant, I loved her, and Obert became aware of that and he liked me. I was a friend of Mr. Miller's for many years when I was in the Army I was stationed in Fort Sill, Oklahoma in basic training and the first three day pass I got I called Obert Miller and I got on a bus and went to Hugo and he entertained me for three days. You know, you form some nice friendships. He was an old man, but he saw that as a kid I was good around the circus, and he liked me and I thought he was a wonderful old man, so it was a nice thing.

Then after Kelly-Miller, in 1944 we went to . . . Obert Miller was tight with a buck, so he paid our family \$100 a week, that was for the Herriott family. My sister did swinging ladder and web and she rode manege, and I rode manege, we did the dogs and ponies, my dad was equestrian director and my mother was not a performer, but on Mills Brothers in 1942 and 1943 and also on Kelly-Miller in 1944, the cook would blow and my mother would cook. And boy, oh boy, what a cookhouse; my mother even baked pies in those old days with those wood ranges and those old cookhouses, but she was a good cook. So on Kelly-Miller in 1944, the cook blowed and my mother took over the cookhouse. The interesting thing is, you know, you work for the Mills Brothers or you work for the Miller family, but there's a bond of friendship there on smaller circuses. I don't see it so much anymore. But for an example, on Kelly-Miller, they would cook . . . well, the cookhouse tables would be set up and Isla and Dale Miller (Kelly's wife) and Mrs. Rossi and various women, they'd come in between shows and they would put dress patterns and cut them out on the cookhouse table, then sew, you know. That's the way it was done. I remember in 1937 on Barney Brothers Circus we had a female impersonator in the performance; now that was a popular thing back in those days, and they would never tip their mitt, you know. They were in drag and them town suckers thought sure that was a woman, not like Barbetta where he did his act and took the wig off; these guys were. . . . And we had one on Barney Brothers, named Guy Blackburn and he did a cloud swing and some other aerial act; and you know homosexuals were rare in those days . . . openly, and he and the drummer in the band had a relationship and it was accepted on the circus. Circuses could accept all forms of society. I think that's why a lot of these people who couldn't conform to local society went out in show business. But this guy and the drummer lived together and got along good together, and he was a nice guy. My mother, as I said, was a hairdresser, a good one; in those they did marcelling and all these fancy hairdos women did, and my mother was excellent at that. When I was a kid I used to have to sit outside the house trailer with this female impersonator's wig on my head while my mother would set it. It would be like thirty minutes, and I'm dying to run around the lot and do something, but, "No, you sit here, I've got to finish this wig up."

Obert Miller paid my dad a hundred bucks a week, so now we get to the end of the season and Obert comes to my dad and says, "I'd like to have you come back next year, but now all the animals are trained and everything, so I can only offer you \$75."

Well, we went back to Minnesota and my dad got in touch with Zack Terrell and made a deal to go on the Cole Bros. Circus, and he went to St. Paul, Minnesota and joined the show. Zack Terrell used to lease all of his animals to Orrin Davenport, and Orrin Davenport was the big producer of winter dates, and he always used the Cole Bros. Circus. He and Zack Terrell were good friends. So





In 1945 the Herriott family joined the big Cole Bros. Circus, shown here on the shores of Lake Michigan at Racine, Wisconsin on 13 August 1945. Pfening Archives.

Terrell told my dad, "You join in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I'll have the liberty act and elephant act there." And from St. Paul, I think they went to Detroit, Cleveland, and Rochester and so on. Anyway, he joined the Cole show. He got my cousin Gee Gee a job there riding the 16 horse hitch, a Roman standing hitch. And my cousin Baby Vates, she was divorced from this Hollywood fellow, and he got her; she did a Roman ring act and web and so on. So in 1945 my dad went on the Cole Bros. Circus. That was thrilling for me, I couldn't be there; I was in school, but then he went into Louisville from the winter dates into winter quarters. Then when the show got on the road in the summertime, I went out and I was able to go with my dad on the Cole Bros. Circus for the short time during the summer. And to me that was just the greatest circus in the world. All those horses. It was a wonderful thing. So he was there in 1945, and then he left in 1946 and went down in southern Iowa. Two fellows down there bought a bunch of horses and ponies and six mules and my dad trained a whole bunch of acts for these people as a commercial venture, they sold them. But they furnished us a home there and I went to school there in Iowa.

A little background information again, to go way back. When my Uncle George had his Shell Bros. Circus out, he wintered right in St. Peter for the first couple of years; he called it Zellmar Bros., the first circus. The reason he called it Zellmar Bros. is that back in those days Gollmar Bros. was a very popular circus and he infringed a little bit on that name of Gollmar with Zellmar. In fact, my sister's middle name Jean Zellmar, and Gee Gee's name is Georgetta Zellmar Engesser, if you can imagine that. She doesn't like that to be known, but anyway, I'm going to publicize it right now.

Anyway, I think for maybe three years he (Uncle George) wintered in St. Peter, and there was a big building right downtown that he wintered his circus in. Even the old timers would always talk about when they had elephants right there in downtown St. Peter. There was a young boy who went to school there, a local boy, and

he went on the road with my Uncle George's circus; his name was Bill Blomburg. So he went and he worked around the animals and so on, and then he got caught up in the show business and he was a nice looking man, a big fellow, great big fellow, and over the years he went around some rodeos and some wild west shows and various things and came up with the idea and got a bunch of Alaskan Husky dogs and he trained them to do an act. He would dress in a parka and he looked like an Eskimo, he let his hair grow fairly long, and he was a very handsome man; and he did so well with these Alaskan Husky dogs that he went into vaudeville and he was a headliner. He played the Palace in New York and everything. And he had his dog pedestals made like huge cakes of ice. And the seating for the dogs was like the aurora borealis, in all colors, and it was a very high class popular vaudeville act. In fact, he was engaged to one of the Duncan sisters, who were part of big famous vaudeville act. Anyway, he did well. After vaudeville flopped, he took out rodeo and wild west shows, and he called it Barker Bros. Circus and Rodeo. He worked for Barnes & Caruthers and other fair booking agencies, and put on quite an elaborate circus and wild west show in front of a grandstand. In fact,

Cole Bros. Circus billstand for engagement at Joplin, Missouri, 13 September 1945. Pfening Archives.





he had the Runynoff family with him with their dancing horses, and he always had a lot of jumping horses; trick horses; wild west show stuff. He had the Reinhart family with him, he was a big time operator.

When he was on my Uncle George's show back in those early years, he became infatuated with my cousin Baby Vates, she was a beautiful woman. Well, after she divorced this California guy, he came back in the picture and he courted her and he married her. They were married for a few years, and that marriage ended in divorce, too. She had some emotional problems and he was a heavy drinking man, and so on.

I got off the track here. What led me into that, I can't remember. Oh, yes. Later my cousin Gee Gee duplicated that Alaskan Husky act and was very successful with it. But that's where she got the idea from.



John Herriott and his family spent the 1946 season on Jay Gould's Circus out of Glencoe, Minnesota. Pfening Archives.

Now I know where I am. This Blomburg was quite a promoter, he was quite a wheeler and dealer and operator, well met, big booming voice, good looking guy, just an overwhelming personality. He played the county fair in Wabasha, Minnesota, that's right on the Mississippi River by Lake Pepin, and the sheriff there was a fellow named Johnny Diggins, and the county attorney was a fellow named Arnold Hatfield. They were involved in the fair, naturally, and they met Bill Blomburg and he was overwhelming to them, and they invited him to make a winter quarters in Wabasha, when he finished with his touring. They had a local livestock sales barn that was city owned and it was going broke; nobody had ever operated it successfully. Now here's this Bill Blomburg, a circus guy, a wild west guy, the Alaskan Husky dog guy, and that son of a gun took over that sales barn and he made it a booming success. I mean we were the most popular sales barn in that part of Minnesota. He even got an auctioneer's license and he hired a first class guy that knew all about cows. He didn't know nothing about cows, but he could go out and tell a good cow from a bad cow. So we were down in Centerville, Iowa, my dad was training down there, and he got done and the animals were sold, so Bill Blomburg knew my dad and got in touch with him and we moved to Wabasha, Minnesota. My dad trained a black, white and brown Morocco liberty act. So we went there and my dad managed this sales barn, because Blomburg would get awful drunk and not tend to business, but he was an overwhelming guy. My dad was a low key about himself. So we lived there, and my dad managed the sales barn and trained . . . they only did sales once a week and then we trained these horses.

Then in the summer of 1946, my dad went out and toured with the Jay Gould Circus. I don't know if you ever heard of that. Jay

Gould was the guy that had a circus-carnival operation for many, many years. He did a free circus on the streets and then he brought his carnival in for a fireman's celebration, or VFW, or whatever. My dad went there, and the Blomburgs had an excellent dog and pony act, a first class act, and he had nice high school horses, and my dad went there with the horses, and the dogs and ponies, and a comedy mule--a January mule act. And I rode the high school horse. The cue into January mule act by the announcer was "That beautiful horse was named Silver Lady, and we offer anybody a \$1,000 if they have a horse that can duplicate the tricks that Silver Lady did." And my dad did a rube clown routine and he'd come riding in on the mule, and the announcer would ask, "What are you doing here?" "I come to get the thousand bucks," dad says, and the dialogue goes on like the old January mule type act. So that's what we did.

Well, then, I came back. I was with my dad through most of the summer and then right before Labor Day, Blomburg booked some rodeos on fairs, so then I went out with him. I worked the liberty act that my dad had trained, and we did these fairs. We were back in Wabasha, we had an apartment there, living there and going to school, and in December, my dad got a phone call from Noyelles Burkhart, who was a general manager at that time for Zack Terrell on Cole Bros. Noyelles was married to Hilda Nelson, and Zack Terrell was married to her sister Estrella Nelson. Anyway, Noyelles called my dad and said, "We just had a hell of a thing happen here. Paul Nelson got his leg shot off, and he is in the hospital and they had to amputate his leg." He was the horse trainer and the performance director. He said, "The Orrin Davenport dates start in Saginaw, Grand Rapids, and so on. Can you get here and take these palomino horses, and go on the Orrin Davenport dates that Paul was booked for?" So my dad left the next day and went to Louisville and went back and made the winter dates. Paul Nelson was a dynamic guy in his day. When he was young, he was a ball of fire. He had learned his trade on the Sparks Circus under a wonderful trainer named Carlos Carrion; then he worked there under Jack Joyce, and Paul became a pretty good horse trainer. He was featured with these twelve palomino horses and . . .

Riker: We're with Paul Nelson. He was with a little show out of Jackson, Michigan.

Herriott: Oh, the Nelson family.

Riker: They were all with him back . . . and I've got some. . .

Herriott: You know they were a great, great risley act; one of the great circus risley acts of all times, and Rosina was a great tight wire artist. And I think Theo just died, the other sister.

Riker: Didn't Rosina die just a couple years ago?

Herriott: A few years ago. She was married to a doctor up there in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. She used to come and visit us in Detroit all the time; she's a very outgoing person, Rosina. There was an aunt Adele who was married to Louie Reed; they had the Adele Nelson Dancing Elephants. Louie Reed was a great elephant trainer. She had a son, Bobby Nelson who had a pig act: Bobby Nelson's Pigs. He was on the Polack show.

But, Paul, when he got his leg shot off, my dad made the winter dates. Now this happened right during the holidays, I believe. When the Cole show opened in April, he had a wooden leg and he worked. Awesome thing for a guy, he was such a determined guy,



but the amazing thing was the show had trained a horse—before he had his leg shot off—he worked the liberty horses on horse-back, and so when the show opened he worked the act on horse-back like he did the year before. But he continued on and he went on Dailey Bros.; he was on Mills Bros.; on Hunt Bros. He would be the horse trainer and the equestrian director and he would even put up the big top and ramrod and superintendent. Dynamic man! He's in our club here through the winter and he walks with hardly any noticeable limp at all and his leg is off right below the knee. I've known him for years and years and he's quite a guy.

So, anyway, my dad stayed on the show and really helped him, too. They were good friends, they were. And old John Smith, the great old trainer, was there and Alabama and all the guys. So in 1947, I went on the show in the summertime and stayed a few weeks through the summer. Then at the end of the 1947 season, Paul Nelson is back again, so they couldn't afford two principal horse trainers, so my dad left the show.

In 1948, I graduated from high school in St. Peter, Minnesota. I went to school all over hell. My mother, no matter where we were, my sister and I went to school; but I graduated from my home town and I was one of the local kids. The kids from St. Peter—I'm in and out, I used to be—but I was one of the kids. I was a cheerleader and I wrote the class history for the year book. I was a regular town kid. This was wonderful because it gave me both sides of the spectrum. So in 1948 I went on the Kelly-Miller show for a few weeks and I sold banners with Buck Reger. We used to go downtown in the morning. He had Parkinson's disease, but he was . . . he could sell those banners. He'd lie like hell, but he'd sell ten banners every day. Again, Norman Anderson [in an interview in the January-February 1996 *Bandwagon*] brings out about how he paid Herb Walters \$100 a week for the concession privilege, right? When I was on the Kelly-Miller show, Buck Reiger paid Obert Miller \$150 a week for the privilege of selling banners. Now that's all he had to give up was \$150 and he sold ten banners every day for \$10; that's \$700 a week he made; because they did a Sunday matinee only. So I drove him. His wife Tava usually drove him, but her sister married to a doctor in Omaha, a very, very high line doctor, and they would get a motor home or trailer and travel on the show. Wonderful people, anyway, Dr. Dunne. So when I was

Herriott was on the 1950 Cole Bros. Circus that featured William Boyd, Hopalong Cassidy. Owned by Chicago real estate tycoon Arthur Wirtz, the show played much of the season indoors or in stadiums. Pfening Archives.

there I drove Buck so Tava could stay and visit with the family on the lot. He'd let me sell the gas banner, which was a natural because they're going to gas up the trucks, so you'd get a sawbuck from that guy. Then he'd let me sell the hay dealer or the feed dealer, the naturals, and then he'd sell the other ones who were a little more hard to sell. He'd give them the pitch, "I'm C. R. Reiger, advertising representative of the Al G. Kelly-Miller Brothers World's Second Largest Circus. You saw all those trucks rolling through town this morning." Kelly-Miller always paraded the trucks, even if the lot was on the same side as where they pulled into town; but in those days the trucks were beautifully painted, it was a showcase circus. He'd whip out an 8 x 10 and say, "Here's our circus at Soldier Field in Chicago, 10,000 paid admissions," and he'd have a picture of the Ringling show with all the people, and he'd say, "Also, now later you're going to see our elephant herd come up to the Chevrolet garage." They'd sold that Chevrolet banner and they'd would march all the elephants up with Chevrolet blankets on them, and first and finest in the low price field, and the big elephant had on her blanket, "No job too big for Chevrolet." Then the baby elephant, "No job too small." Even in those days they had eight, nine, or ten elephants on the show. That's before Bill Woodcock came over; a guy named Jack Lorenzo was the boss elephant man. But we'd sell these banners.

So I stayed there and I was thinking maybe to get around the front end, which I should have done, but didn't. My dad was strictly an animal trainer and equestrian director and he led me in that direction. But my mother had been around Uncle George's show around the front end, and she always said, "Johnny, you get up around that front end and get in the concession department." But I didn't heed her advice.

So in 1948 and in 1949, I went to work at the local . . . when I was in school I used to work part time in a hardware store, and I went to work in this store after I graduated, after I got through with the Kelly-Miller thing and got back home. I did well there, and I became the Assistant Manager and I sold outdoor roofing and siding and stuff like that. They transferred me to Owatonna, Minnesota in 1949 as Assistant Manager. Jeez, I was only nineteen years old, and the bookkeeper. I had taken bookkeeping and typing in high school so I was looking at a career maybe with this Gamble-Skogma, big low-priced hardware and retail chain in the Minnesota area. So I was there and my dad got a call from Frank Orman who told him that the Cole Brothers Circus. was sold to Jack Tavlin and some Texas millionaire backers. They went out in

1949 and business was terrible; they had overextended themselves. They had Jacks of Hollywood wardrobe, and a high budget show. They still owed Zack Terrell \$125,000. They more or less went broke, Jack Tavlin.

They had replaced Paul Nelson, after Terrell left. Paul Nelson was part of the family and once Terrell was gone, they stopped using him. Noyelles Burkhart was gone, too, he went to Ringling as a legal adjuster under Herb Duvall. So Frank Orman took over as manager; he's an old grifter showman and quite a guy, Frank Orman was. He liked my dad and he said,







Arthur M. Wirtz bought the Cole Bros. Circus from Jack Tavlin in 1949. He is better remembered as the owner of the Chicago Black Hawks, the Chicago Bulls, Chicago Stadium, the Bismarck Hotel, the Hollywood Ice Revue starring Sonja Henie, and about half of downtown Chicago.

to work a liberty act. My dad is going to be the boss horse trainer and so we headed for Ojus, Florida, really North Miami. They had started to establish a winter quarters there. We went down, trained and practiced, and we opened in Chicago Stadium with Hopalong Cassidy. We went the whole season in buildings and ball parks. We played Yankee Stadium in New York, Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, Forbes Field Pittsburgh, a fantastic show. It had the Wallenda seven people pyramid, the George Hanneford family riding act, Con Colleano, Dorita Konyot, a great show. Then from Ebbets Field, we opened under canvas in Jersey City, New Jersey; then we made a canvas tour until August 5th in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, when Wirtz closed the show. He was not into under canvas business, there wasn't enough money in it. In Yankee Stadium we had one show for 35,000 people, and Wirtz, he didn't want to fool with [canvas]. He was like Irvin Feld, only he was ahead of his time; he was doing what Feld does now, arenas. He had his own in-house people; the front end on the building and in the ball parks were guys that were PR men for the International Boxing Club and the Hollywood Ice Revue, and they were just like Feld has his in-house. Incidentally, Irvin Feld bought him out. He bought Holiday on Ice and that from Arthur Wirtz. That's another story, too; and I was in both pictures there.

But in 1950, we closed in August in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania and we didn't have any place to go; they had abandoned this proposed project for wintering in Florida. Terrell Jacobs had a home in Peru, Indiana, and barns, and he and his wife Dolly had divorced and she had the goods on him, so to speak; I think she caught him messing around or something.

Riker: With whom? Everybody?

Herriott: Well, I don't know. Terrell, he was a great showman, a nice man; well, I guess he was playing around and she caught him. But she took everything, she took everything, she took everything! The only way he saved the elephants Empress, Modoc and Judy (that Luke Anderson talked about) they owned them then, Terrell and Dolly, she took the elephants and the only way he kept his cat act and his winter quarters is Arthur Wirtz bailed him out. He had an arrangement with Arthur: he took first mortgage on his home in Peru and he was able to keep his wild animal act, Terrell, with the idea that he would pay Mr. Wirtz back. Well, he never made

"Milt, Arthur Wirtz bought this circus, the Chicago Stadium Corporation, and Sonja Henie Ice Show and the International Boxing Club, and so on, and Mr. Wirtz paid off Zack Terrell his \$125,000 and he got all of the creditors, the judge threw their claims out of court, and for \$125,000, Arthur Wirtz owned the Cole Bros. Circus. So he was going to open in the Chicago Stadium in 1950, he owned the building, with Hopalong Cassidy as the feature star. I'm going

enough to pay him back. So in 1950, Mr. Wirtz had to have some place for the Cole Bros. Circus to go so he foreclosed on Terrell Jacobs and removed him . . . which is now Paul Kelly's place in Bunker Hill, Indiana.

When we came there, we had to go to the Navy base up there in Bunker Hill, and they rented one of the hangars and they moved all the circus wagons in there, all of them; because the facilities at Terrell's place was only for his lions and a little elephant barn. So, that's when they built all the facilities that are at Paul Kelly's now—through that winter. We had the menagerie tent up all winter outside, we kept the horses and the elephants until they got the elephant barn big enough to move. We had thirteen elephants and then they built the leantos for the horses and the ring barn. But I saw the menagerie tent up when you couldn't tell it was a tent, it looked like a big mountain of snow, and the grooms we had, Bill Waite and these guys, slept in there. And we would go in in the morning with salamanders with coke in drums, and the guys would be almost frozen. That's dedicated circus people.

So we stayed there in 1950, 1951. I remember in Yankee Stadium in June, 1950, Tommy Hanneford and myself and Don Zaccini (the guy that went out of the cannon for Bruno Zaccini) and Gunther Wallenda, we were all in the dressing room and we heard, "Harry Truman sends troops to Korea, and Selective Service will take place." Oh, oh. Well, I didn't get drafted until late in 1951. So that was the end of my career.

I went to Fort Sill in Oklahoma, and was a cannoner on a 105 Howitzer and I had an immediate need for my M.O.S., a cannoner on a 105 Howitzer, in the far eastern command, which was Korea; so the military flew me to Toyko, Japan and we were in what they call the Repo-Depot there in Toyko, scared to death. I always thought I was a lucky guy. When I got drafted they said half the draftees go to Germany, half go to Korea. So I thought I would end up in Germany; I'm just a lucky guy. Ho, ho. When I got my orders it was for far eastern command. We get to Japan and went down and zeroed in our weapons, they issued us M-1 rifles. Now an artillery man carries a carbine. Well there were no carbines issued, we got a M-1 that meant Infantry. I thought, "Oh, my God, that's even worse." So we went and zeroed in our weapons and we're marching back and now, in a day or two, they're going to ship us to Korea. And over the intercom in the bunk room there, "Private Herriott, report to Lieutenant So-and-So." So I go in and the Lieutenant has my M.O.S., which shows what you do. And he's reading my M.O.S. and says, "I see you were an animal trainer." "Yeah." He said, "Listen, (they had that replacement that every six months you could go on . . . what do they call it, R& R?) we got a dog platoon in Korea, some canine dogs, and the fellow in charge had to go home and we need a replacement. You look like you could fit in there. I think we're going to switch your orders over." I thought, "Wow, I'm lucky. I'm going to guard an ammo dump in Pusan, or something." So, I go to Korea. Now I get to Pusan, which is in the southern end of Korea, and they put me on a troop train and I'm going north, north, north. Then they put me on a truck with about seven guys and I'm going north, north, north. I get above the 38th parallel, they put me in a Jeep and haul me up on the top of a mountain, and there's a guy sitting in there with a commo wire phone in a little tent, colder than hell, this was like in February, and I got my duffle bag and the guy commo wired to this 26th Infantry scout dog platoon. He calls down there and says, "Hey, we got a replacement for you up here." Some guy said, "Well, we'll be up and get him." Now, this guy marches up the hill and I said, "I'm Private Herriott." And this guy says, "Your ass has had it." Oh, we're right on



the front line, we're right at the barbed wire, the main line of resistance. And we had these dogs who were trained by scent or sound to go out in no man's land, and we'd go on ambush patrols and reconnaissance patrols. Wow! That was terrible. We were living in a bunker, there were nine of us, nine men and nine dogs, and there was another complement, nine men and nine dogs, with another company. We were attached to the 40th Infantry division, which was the California National Guard. I go in this bunker and these guys are in there, and the guy says to me, "You like beer?" I said, "I sure do." Well, they got a beer ration once a month and it just happened the beer ration came through that day. So, my God, I sat there and drank beer with them. I stayed there for five and a half months. Now, I would have stayed there six months, but I was there five and a half months, and I did work with the dogs and I went on patrols. It was horrendous, oh, God. While I was there, one of my buddies got killed on a patrol; I mean it was serious, serious business. Scared to death.

So I get a letter from my mother. In the meantime, my father had quit the Cole Bros. Circus in Peru and he bought the local taxicab company in my hometown, and he was operating that, it was only a three or four cab business, no big deal. But there's Gustavus College and the state hospital in St. Peter, and he got a lot from the bus, a lot of traffic. So it was a good little business, nothing serious, but it was okay.



Herriott worked numerous dates for Orrin Davenport, the great Shrine Circus producer, in the 1950s. Davenport is shown here in 1946. Pfening Archives.

months. It could take forever. Now my dad was in the hospital like a month and he was okay. He can move his arms, though he had a little weakness in one arm, but like I said, he always was a letter writer. So he wrote Dr. Mann, who was still the director of the National Zoo, with whom he had corresponded over the years, and he just said that he had a stroke and so on. Dr. Mann wrote a letter to me immediately, (and I had seen Dr. Mann on the King show when we played around Washington, I had seen him various times and he saw me kind of getting going on my career) and he wrote: "John, unfortunately your dad had this stroke. I note that you are a Private serving your country in Korea. I did a stint in the service



Milt Herriott, left, Dorothy Herbert, and John Herriott on King Bros. Circus, 1954. Pfening Archives.

during the Second World War." He was a technical advisor in the South Pacific, he was the world's greatest authority at that time on bugs and insects, or something. So he was the guy who went over to see about delousing and all that stuff. He said, "I wrote your dad and told him any help I could do, I would be happy to. I understand that your parents are putting in for your discharge and maybe I can be of help." And he wrote a letter to the Inspector General, and sent me a carbon copy of it, saying, "I am a member of the Circus Fans Association and we try to help various circus people. Milton Herriott, noted circus man, recently suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, and his son, John, File Reference . . . blah, blah, blah, in Korea, and I ask that an immediate discharge be given." A week later I was out of there. A week later! The Colonel couldn't believe, because they knew of this Red Cross red tape. A week later, I'm out of there!

I go home and ran the cab business for my dad. Mr. Wirtz's man, Mr. Horsman, called from Chicago and my dad went back to Peru. Within three months he went back to Peru and managed the operation there. Frank Orman had remained in Peru, then went to the Clyde Beatty Circus to manage the show for Beatty, and then they called my dad and he went and managed the Peru operation. We didn't go on the road, We went to the Chicago Stadium and put out a fair unit for Barnes & Carruthers, played the winter dates with the animals. But, anyway, then I went back. We sold the cab business and they tried to get me back in the Army and the damn draft board said, "Well, you got this discharge, now we understand your father is back working and you've sold the taxicab company." So I had the meeting of the draft board in my hometown and the one guy on the draft board looked at my service record and I had the combat infantry badge, five months on the front line in Korea, and the guy said, "We ain't gonna bring you back, you served your time. Five months is long enough, we're not going to re-draft you."

So then in 1952, I got out of the Army, went back to Peru and then I worked with my dad in 1952 and 1953. In 1954, Floyd King and Arnold Maley . . . Floyd King split with the Cristianas and he and Arnold Maley put out the big King Bros. Circus. He came to Peru with Floyd King and Ira Watts and made a deal and they bought the twelve palomino liberty horses and what we called the 101 Ranch Show Elephant Act, which was a center ring elephant act. I showed the animals to Floyd King in the ring barn in Peru, and Wirtz wanted to get out of the circus business, it was just a lingering thing with him. So he was happy to find a sucker to buy this stuff. And Floyd King put \$2,000 down. I remember it well. My dad handled all the transactions because he was the manager of the thing there, and he got the 101 Ranch elephants and the twelve





Gil Gray Circus letterhead from 1958. Pfening Archives.

palomino liberty act and they hired me to go on the show. Now my dad had to stay in Peru because they still had six more elephants and two more liberty acts, and they bought a bunch of trucks and trailers and semis, and Wirtz owned a whole sport show. He owned and controlled seventeen buildings in the United States, so he would put a sport show in there. Well, that's log rollers and the water tank, and my dad handled all that for him; it was all worked out of Peru. All the equipment was kept there and they'd truck it out; and also some stuff with the Hollywood Ice Revue. They'd take the trucks and move ice equipment, and so on. So not only was it the circus operation, it was part of his company. So my dad was going to stay there.

I worked the Orrin Davenport dates. I worked Detroit and Cleveland and Cincinnati; then Buffalo, New York. I went to Macon, Georgia for the big opening of the Mighty King Bros. Circus. In the meantime, Wirtz bought the other liberty horses and elephants, so then they all came back. Well, my dad still had to put out a circus unit for Barnes & Carruthers; Arthur Wirtz owned Barnes & Carruthers fair booking. So he stayed in Peru and put the fair unit together, and then he came on the show. It was quite an interesting season. And they had also contracted the elephants to be in a movie in Hollywood called *Jupiter's Darling* with Howard Keel and Esther Williams. It was an MGM musical about Hannibal's war elephants. So I went out with Cole Bros. Circus elephants, me and Bert Pettus and Lou Regan went out there, and we stayed for at least twelve weeks in Hollywood. We did this on location and did the movie. Then I came back and then my dad left and we went . . . the elephants were booked on the Texas dates,

Gil Gray, in trailer, greets Paul Van Pool, wealthy circus fan from Joplin, Missouri. Pfening Archives.



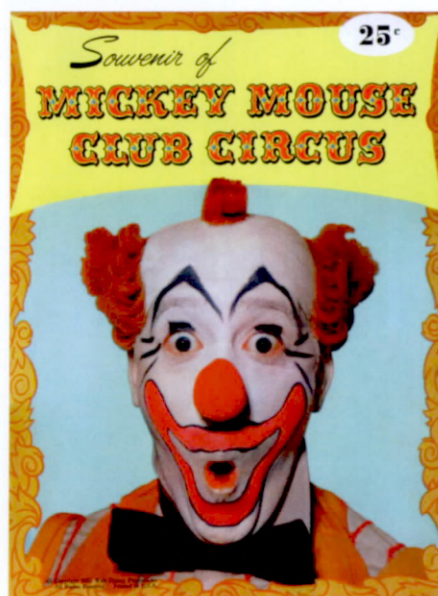
Houston, Fort Worth and so on. In fact, they had to hire Bill Woodcock and Freddie Logan from the Kelly-Miller show to cover the King show while we went to the Texas dates. So that was an interesting season.

When I was in Cleveland that winter before, Colonel Harry Thomas, the great circus equestrian director and announcer, always made the Orrin Davenport dates. I

was there with the twelve palomino liberty horses and working the elephant act, and I stayed in the Auditorium Hotel in Cleveland, right across the street from the arena. Mary Ruth had been on the King-Cristiani show the year before, doing trick riding and web and showgirl stuff, and she's an Ohio farm girl. She was in her last year in high school, and she and three of her girlfriends came to Cleveland to see the Grotto Circus, because now she's getting into the circus business. So I was coming out of the hotel right before the matinee and Harry Thomas was in the street and he called me, "Hey, Johnny, I want you to meet a little girl here that was on the show with us last summer." So that's when I met Mary Ruth. She had been on the King-Cristiani show and she read *Billboard*. It was what we called the "chump educator." So then she asked if I was going to go with the King Circus with the animals. I said, "I think I am. Yeah."

So then when school was out and we played in Pennsylvania and Ohio, she joined. My mother was on the circus, I was out in Hollywood being a movie star. So my mother wrote me a letter and said to me, (now I'm 23 years old), "Johnny, the prettiest little blond headed girl joined the show here about a week or so ago." My mother was a very clean German woman and she saw Mary Ruth washing and ironing her clothes outside the sleeper; she had an iron! And my mother sees this girl washing her clothes and

ironing her clothes and she's thinking, "Boy, that's a girl for Johnny." So, then when I came back on the show, we courted through the season. We had the Texas dates booked with the elephants and we got married in the center ring of the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas on Thanksgiving Day, 1954, during intermission, in front of 10,500 people. My mother and father



In 1955 Disneyland hired Gil Gray to produce the Mickey Mouse Club Circus, which featured the Mouseketeers, including Annette Funicello, working along side circus professionals. Herriott worked a mixed liberty camel and llama drill. Pfening Archives.





Herriott poses with two Mouseketeers and llamas at the Mickey Mouse Club Circus, 1955. Pfening Archives.

got married in center ring on my Uncle George's circus in 1926. So it was kind of a second time around. It was a wonderful show; this producer was a rich banker from Houston that used to dabble as a circus producer, named Johnny Andrews. He'd produce the show in Houston and Fort Worth. He brought Barbetta in with an aerial production, he brought in Hal Sands' Manhattan Rocket Dancing Girls from New York; a big, big show. They had the Walendas in there and had the Loyal Repensky riding act with Justino Loyal; so I'm there with the elephants and we have two pony drills and my dad came there, my dad and I were there together. So Justino Loyal, I got married, and now he was in good with Pat Valdo on the Ringling show, this Justino. If you recall, he used to frame what they called "show owned riding acts," naturally he was the feature, but he'd take Jackie Bostock and people and put riding acts together. So Justino said to me one day, "You and your wife, you work liberty horses," and I could do a little bareback riding and so could Mary Ruth, trick riding and so on and he said, "Listen, I get in touch with Pat Valdo, I could put you and your wife in my riding act, to carry pyramids and stuff like that; and they need an end ring guy to work the liberty act with Charlie Moroski. I think I could get you on the Ringling show if you and your wife would like to go." Well, Mary Ruth, she . . . oh, God, that's great! T

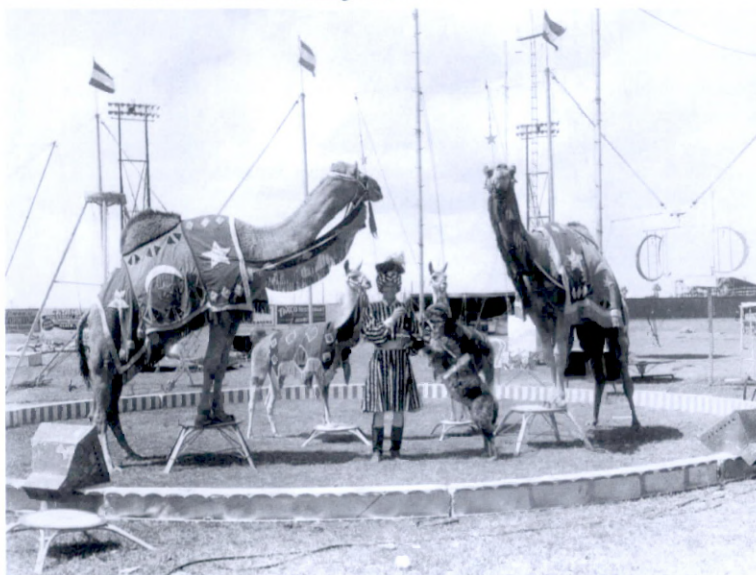
In the meantime, Bill Moore, a big fat man, was Clyde Beatty's confidant, and he came to Fort Worth and came to my dad and said, "Listen. . . ." Johnny Cline was the equestrian director after Jack Joyce on the Beatty show, but Bill Moore [skip in the tape; content missing] . . . Beatty meant working with my dad, I loved my dad and everything, but Ringling meant now I'd have to work with Charlie Moroski. Now I'm 23 years old. Gil Gray had this little Shrine Circus operation wintering in San Angelo, Texas and he had

three baby Asian elephants and some young camels and llamas, and an old fellow named George King had started training on them. Gil Gray is looking for a trainer, so I went with Gil Gray. I thought I gotta do this on my own; I'm not going to work for my dad any more. I'm not going to be an end ringer on Ringling, even if it was Ringling. Boy, I was eager, I wanted to train those little elephants, that camel and llama act.

So I made a deal and went with Gil Gray. Mary Ruth was heartbroken, we had just gotten married and right away we have a big blow up over this. And I said to Mary Ruth, "Look, Mary Ruth, someday I'm going to go to Ringling, but I'm going to go as a big league guy; I'm not going to go through the back door." "Well, that will never happen." But it did happen, but I mean that's just. . . . So I went with Gil Gray and I spent six years with his circus. He was a fine man and he had a beautiful circus, exquisite. Strictly buildings and ballparks. We played everything from Edmonton, Alberta to Corpus Christi, Texas. We never crossed the Rocky Mountains or the Mississippi River. But he was the king of the Shrine circuses in that territory. We had a glorious six years.

I had gone to Hollywood with the elephants, and the number one man in Hollywood for animals was a fellow named George Emerson. George was on a retainer with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio. The studios had an agreement, anytime they wanted a circus act or any animals, George Emerson was the guy. The way he got in, when he made the first Tarzan movie, they had a rhinoceros, and Tarzan was supposed to ride a rhinoceros. George Emerson was with the Al G. Barnes Circus back in those days and he doubled for, I think, Elmo Lincoln and rode the rhinoceros. He never left Hollywood from then on; he became Mr. Big Shot, and he was a super, super nice man. The reason they did this movie *Jupiter's Darling* . . . Frank Whitbeck was in charge of all the publicity for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer internationally; he was a big, big executive, and he loved elephants. That why they had the Tarzan movies and they had the little guy with the Apsalian Queen, the MGM elephants and the chimp Cheetah, that was all Frank Whitbeck, he loved that. And George Emerson

Herriott with the camels and llamas on a Gil Gray outdoor date in 1957. Pfening Archives.







Herriott worked Shrine dates for Howard Suez's Clyde Bros. Circus in the late 1950s. Pfening Archives.

was the trainer. So that Emerson got in so good, too, from the Tarzan movies. Now Frank Whitbeck came up with the idea of doing this musical with elephants, so when we went there, every day he'd come out in a limo and he would pet the elephant; he loved them.

So now I go with Gil Gray's circus and I'm there for the first season, and George Emerson called me up from California. We were in Deadwood, South Dakota in the summertime and I got a call from George, he said, "Johnny, where the hell are you?" I said, "We're in Deadwood, South Dakota." He said, "Well I thought you were someplace. I'm in Rapid City. I'm here doing a movie called *The Last Hunt*." Which was about the last big buffalo hunt, and he was the ramrod and they were herding buffalo with helicopters for these scenes. Anyway, he said, "We're off for the weekend and I'm going to rent a car and come up to see you in Deadwood." Well, Gil Gray knew who George Emerson was, and Gil Gray was a hell of a guy, loved to drink, and a super guy, so here comes George Emerson and spent a day and a night with us and we entertained him and had a ball. Well, then, later we were in Dodge City, Kansas, right at the end of the season and George Emerson called me up. In this movie, *Jupiter's Darling*, we colored the elephants with vegetable coloring for the final finale scene, all different colors. And I watched how they did that, so when I went with Gil Gray I colored those elephants. So George called me up and said, "Listen, do you still color those elephants?" "Yeah." He said, "Listen, Johnny, you get them colored up good and you shine all your stuff up, because Walt Disney is going to put on a circus in Disneyland (that was the first year Disneyland was open) and the producer of the Mickey Mouse Club is going to be in Dodge City, Kansas today. He's flying in to see your stuff." Wow! So in the meantime they called Gil Gray, too, and Gil came to me and here comes this guy named Hal Adelquest, the producer of the Mickey Mouse Club. He not only hired the elephants, he hired the whole Gil Gray Circus, and we went to Disneyland and put on a beautiful circus under a big top for twelve weeks. A wonderful, wonderful circus. I had the camels and elephants and then they had seal acts, and they had Aldolph Delbosk and Serenada, the musical horse, and Ted DeWayne was the manager of the circus and he had his teeterboard and flying trapeze acts on there; and Professor George Keller was there with his wild animal act. And that's when I first met and became a life-long friend with Fay Alexander. He was doing the movie *Trapeze* in Paris, and the minute the movie was over they flew him in and he was the feature trapeze star in what they called "The Mickey Mouse Club Circus." So we did that and that was quite an experience.

Then I spent six years with Gil Gray and I'm getting itchy feet;

I gotta move on. I was never a guy that. . . I couldn't just stay there the rest of my life. I got along great with Gil Gray and we had a good relationship, but I wanted to train some horses.

So the Hunt show out in New Jersey, Marsha Hunt had bought six young horses. They had an old palomino liberty act, but they bought all these young horses and they advertised in *Billboard* for a horse trainer, and I answered the ad. I got hired, so we tearfully left the Gil Gray Circus and went to New Jersey, and I went in the ring barn out there and started training on these horses. Trevor Bale had been there the year before, and he had a little jackass act with little donkeys, and then they

had some ponies. So I was routining and training, and I was only there maybe two or three months and my daughter Cindy was born in the Trenton, New Jersey Hospital.

This guy had a golden retriever dog act on sports shows, a big time act called Swede Filler's Golden Retrievers from Farmer City, Illinois. It was a great act. They did water retrieving with live ducks and they did the stage act, and this guy was a self-taught dog trainer, but he was a top act in the sports shows. He had a heart attack and died, and Joe Zoppe had worked rodeos with him, and Jimmy Murphy, a Roman standing rider, knew me and they recommended me as a professional to take over these dogs. So I went in and told the Hunts, who were very nice, that I had an opportunity to really get in the big leagues with this dog act. I was going to get 50% and they got big bucks on the sport shows, and they had booked the Roy Rogers State Fair Revue for ten weeks at two grand a week. Back in those days, that was big bucks.

So I left the Hunt show and went to Farmer City, Illinois and I did the sports shows, and Roy Rogers had a slight heart attack and canceled the State Fair Revue. So here we are with nothing booked, so I went to this family and advised them that I had to get out and scuffle through the summer and I would come back and do the sports shows in the winter. They had a kennel and could keep the dogs in the kennel. I called Howard Suez and I went on his Clyde Bros. Circus. We joined them in Sault Ste. Marie and we did Sudbury, North Bay and all the Canadian swing with Clyde Bros. We stayed there that season, then I went back to Gil Gray. I got back to the Gil Gray winter quarters and he had another trainer, Carly Petersen, who had replaced me. The camel act I had there for six years, so he didn't need that camel act with his circus, so he made a deal with Louie Stern of the Polack circus and he was going to book the camel act for me to go on Polack. I was going to get big money; Polack paid big money.

The camels were going to ride in the baggage car. They used to haul their elephants in the baggage car in those days. In every town they rented a baggage car from the railroad, and left room in the baggage car to haul Mack MacDonald and the Polack elephants and me with the camel act. So, Louie Stern came to winter quarters and I had put a beautiful pony in the act, it was a very nice act, beautiful harness and blankets and everything. And we were all set to go. Now Mack MacDonald was kind of a friend of mine, but we were competitive, too. And with me being an elephant trainer, Mack didn't care too much for a young guy to be around there. And Mack had a history of every once in a while of going on a flying binge drunk and his wife would go in and appear with baby Opal, one elephant; but Louie Stern was very fond of Mack MacDonald. But it was just the idea, it looked a little suspicious that they were going to bring me on the show with the camel act. And Louie Stern even said to me, when he came to visit in the winter quarters, he



said, "Hey, kid, (he called everybody 'kid') if that Mack ever got sick you could work those elephants, couldn't you?" I thought, "Oh, oh." So what happened, Mack MacDonald insisted the elephants were getting too big and there wasn't room in the baggage car. So I got aced out; Mack MacDonald, he aced me out.

So here I am. Now Gil Gray was a fine man. He's paying me in the winter quarters, but he's already got a trainer, so what am I going to do? So, now, Jake Mills called up, because Gil Gray had a steel arena for sale. Gil had built a beautiful aluminum arena for his cat act, so he had this old Alfred Court arena that came with the cat act. It was old. Joe Walsh had trained Gil's cat act for the Benson Wild Animal Farm that had gone on Si Rueben's Rogers Bros. Circus and Joe Horwath was the trainer and then came to Gil Gray. And Gil wanted to sell this steel arena; so Jake Mills was going to import the Zerbini Family—Tarzan Zerbini and his mother, father and sister—and they were coming from France with three lions but they didn't have any arena or anything. So Jake flew to Dallas, where we were in winter quarters, and I knew him from Mills Bros., and I went out and got him and his girlfriend. He brought his little English girlfriend with him. He introduced her to Gil Gray as his choreographer, and we had a big wink over that. But, anyway, I went and got them at the airport and he met Gil Gray. They had never met before, and then I advised him that the camel act was for sale, too, because the deal fell apart with the Polack

John and Mary Ruth Herriott are shown in this publicity photo for the Herriott Family Circus in the 1980s. Their four daughters are in the background. Ringling Art Museum, Tibbals Digital Collection.

show. So he bought it. While he was there, Kelly-Miller was playing over close and I took him over and introduced him to Dory Miller, they had never met each other before, either.

Anyway, the camel act was sold, so I was going to deliver the camels and the steel arena and stuff to Ohio, and I went and got Joe Zoppe to drive his horse truck. He wintered by Dallas. We went up there and pulled into Mills Bros. winter quarters, a desolate place there in Jefferson, Ohio, and the first guy out in the parking lot when we pulled in was Johnny Zerbini with a little French hat with a feather. He looked just like he got off the banana boat. Couldn't speak a word of English. And me and Joe Zoppe and his brother Rico, we were like the flowers in May. They just came from Europe, and his father came out and Charlie Zerbini had a wooden leg, and they were supposed to work these camels. Their deal with Mills was to do the camel act, to do the lion act. So we delivered them, and Jake said to me, "Why don't you come on the show?" And I said, "Well, we could make some kind of a deal." Well, Carlos Carrion had been the horse trainer and he wasn't coming back, so Jake wanted me and my wife. He said we could come on the show. So we did. We made a deal. I went back to Dallas and we drove up and joined the Mills Bros. Circus in winter quarters. But I had this nice camel act on the Gil Gray show.

Riker: What year would that have been, John? 1958, 1959?

Herriott: About 1961 or something. I think it was 1960. And then we went on the circus that season.

Riker: Why don't we cut it off here and then one day we'll do the balance.

To be continued.





# Interviews and Articles on Bloomington and the Circus

By James F. Monahan

*James Monahan (1932-1999) wrote the following essay soon after graduating from Illinois State Normal University (now Illinois State University) in 1956. His purpose is unknown, although it may have been a written for a class while he pursued his M. S. degree in Education at the school. A typescript of his article was recently discovered in the Special Collections and Rare Book Department of Milner Library at Illinois State University. Department head Maureen Brunsdale and her assistant Mark Schmitt kindly made this piece available to Bandwagon, and also provided many of the illustrations from the library's formidable collection of flying trapeze documentation.*

## Interview with Lowell Sherer, July 29, 1957.

Lowell Shearer was in the Y circus doing tumbling. He had developed agility through diving. He was fourteen at the time. He got his start flying with Harry La Mar of Bloomington. Shearer knew La Mar through the Y circuses. One day in 1945, Sherer hopped into the net and did what La Mar's new member was not getting correctly. From that time, he went with the Flying La Mars. Shearer was a catcher.

Mrs. Shearer, the former Mary Stevens of Bloomington, was with La Mar at this time. She met La Mar through her experience with a dance troupe in the Y circus. Flying fascinated her. She asked for the opportunity to learn, but La Mar didn't need anyone at the time. Two years later, about 1938, he came back to Bloomington to enlist her.

The Shearers were married in 1948. They went to Puerto Rico in 1956 with the Pan-American Circus. There they met Manuel Cordera, whose sister, Mrs. Ray Mink of Bloomington, decided that Cordera should come to this town to live. That ended his flying career, which had shown great promise. Sherer had named the act after the boy, The Flying Corderas, which included his wife as a flyer. She took care of their seven month old son Shane at the same time.

Before starting his own act, Sherer worked with Fred Valentine, went to the west coast with the Clyde Brothers Circus, returned to Harry La Mar, and then joined with Bob Fisher.

He had once set up rigging at the Concello Barn—outside in the lot, for the Barn was reserved for Concello's acts. Mrs. Sohn, of Sohn-Thompson Florists, permitted him the use of her farm on West Market Street. Harry La Mar had used the open space at Houghton's Pond, even in the dead of winter. Eddie Ward had practiced on a lot on Bunn Street. (Mamie, Eddie's wife, was the first woman in the U.S. to do a double somersault.) At the height of activity in Bloomington, riggings were seen all over town. Shearer's rigging is now on a lot owned by Mrs. Mink. The city spaces are much better for practice in contrast to the country because of the winds in the open areas.

The rigging, as Sherer sees it, was dropped from the Y because a new gym and more area was needed. He couldn't blame Clarence Rowe, the Y director. And there were hazards at the Y,

too. The apron of the net, that part of the net which extends at an angle up and away from the horizontal part of the net, was directly over a basket rim and very dangerous.

At the present time, Sherer is breaking in a new addition to his act, George Solomon, 19, of Bloomington, who shows great promise. He has what Sherer likes in a flyer, natural ability. Sherer further restricts his flyers from drinking, although smoking is optional. Flying demands lots of concentration, and you can't baby yourself in the game. The best medicine for an injury is work; however, the flyer must be able to tell when an injury requires rest. Mary Sherer at one time flew in a performance with a sprained ankle after the doctor told her she would require two weeks rest. Sherer once caught with a broken thumb, which healed much better than his rest-cured ankle. Flying takes "guts;" needs caution yet nerve.

The best flyers are usually short and light. They are not necessarily muscular. They must have flexibility in order to get good swings; they must be like "a rag from the waist down." "The big guys are usually the catchers."

Shearer's attitude toward an act, his philosophy, is that a performance should be "ballet in the air." He doesn't intend to frighten the crowd with dangerous-looking stunts, but to entertain them.

At the conclusion of an act, each member of the team performs a specialty from which trick he drops to the net. This bit at the end adds glamour to the act and saves time climbing down the rope ladder.

The drop into the net is executed at the height of the swing, the dead end. At such a time, the flyer is almost in a supine position in the air, and in a natural position to land in the net on his back.

The Flying Lamars. Left to right Harry LaMar, Sid Smith, Mary Stevens Shearer and Lowell Shearer about 1948. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.





The flyer hangs from the bar with his fingers only, the thumb being put loosely against it. When a flyer grips the bar in a fist, the muscles of the forearm tend to tighten and remove some of the flexibility. Besides, the thumb does not add any greater security to the hold. In proper position, calluses are developed not all over the palm, but properly at the base of the fingers.

The return swing of a flyer, with his back to the perch, in which he pulls himself into a sitting position, legs outstretched to the front, in order to clear the perch with his rear is called a "back-up."

#### **Interview with H. Wayne Larey, March 23, 1957.**

When Wayne Larey came to Bloomington in 1927, the only places for practice were the Ward Barn and the YMCA. Later Mr. Larey mentioned that the Majestic Theatre was also in use. He explained that only small acts used it. Harry La Mar, who had a stage-flying act, practiced there. Others who used it were people who had wire acts or one-arm swings. The acts needing just a little room worked out there. He thinks that before his time there was an ice-house used. This was about the time of the La Mars and the Fishers.



The Flying Comets: Wayne Larey, left, Lavon Bornhauser, and Bob Porter, 1935-1938. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

Flying acts were the main troupes in Bloomington. There were others, however, perch acts, dog acts, some horse acts. They all came here because it was cheap. the influence of other aerialists was great in bringing acts to Bloomington. Art Concello brought most of the acts to Bloomington that he owned. Others would trail along, having no other place to winter. The fame of Bloomington spread. News traveled fast in the circus world. He spoke of being asked, as it was of everyone from the states, if he were from

Bloomington wherever he went in the world.

Mr. Larey estimated the peak of activity in the city as about 1922-1935. He qualified that statement later by saying that he and Art Concello, during 1934-1938, had the seven flying acts they owned in Bloomington, a number never again reached.

Concerning the attempt to build a municipal training barn in Bloomington in 1939, Mr. Larey said that nothing ever came of it. Such a place would have drawn people from everywhere. During the peak of activity, people stopped in the city going from California to work in the east. Winter aerialist and circus activity in Bloomington was an economic boom. Tilden Hall, he remembered gave a special rate to performers.

The YMCA circuses, put on annually by performers wintering here, drew performers from other parts of the country, too. They came out of courtesy to the Y. They weren't doing anything besides working-out, anyway. Mr. Larey estimated that the cost of the professional talent appearing in the circuses would have been exorbitant had they been paid.

No circuses wintered in the city; only individual acts. Peru, Indiana, was a wintering place for circus people, especially Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, and John Robinson.

Periodically there were vaudeville people stopping in the city.

#### **Interview with Harold Ramage, March 29, 1957.**

The interview began with a question concerning the George Valentine training barn in Normal. The barn was not a training center; it was used mainly by the Valentines. There was no way of heating it in the winter. Visiting acts might train there while they were passing through Normal.

Concerning the training centers, Mr. Ramage said that the Ward Barn was the first, being built around 1910 or 1912. He did not know much about the ice-house that was used, but said that it was on the southeast side of town and used about the time the Ward Barn was built.

For the information regarding the first acts to begin here, Mr. Ramage spoke of the Green Brothers and Charlie Noble, and Louis Fitzhenry, who joined the Noble group. Fitzhenry later became a judge in Bloomington. When Clyde Noble retired from flying, the name of "The Flying Fishers" was taken over by Charlie Waller and his wife. Clyde's act dispersed but since there was no copyright on the name it was confiscated by other people.

Circuses at the Y began in the 1930's. C. D. Curtis was instrumental in this. In regard to practice, he set up a schedule which allowed the acts to begin practice at 8 in the morning until about eleven. Practice in the afternoon was from two until four when high school activities took over, resuming again at nine in the evening until midnight.

At the Majestic Theatre, there were the following acts: Billetti high wire troupe, La Blonde wire act, and Tex Orton and his impalement act. Orton and his daughter also had a perch pole act.

When not practicing, the circus people lead normal lives in Bloomington. Mr. Ramage estimated that the circus people spent about \$25,000 per year in the city. Although the people brought money into town, they never took anything from it. The city fathers lacked interest in making Bloomington even more of a trapeze center by building a municipal training barn, thus the 1939 attempt failed.

Acts favored wintering in the mid-west. Bloomington was centrally located and available facilities were cheap. Animal riding acts would have liked to have come in because grain was cheap, but there was no place for them.

Most of the married acts lived in Tilden Hall Hotel. Single men





Harold T. Ramage atop one of Jack Joyce's camels on Polack Bros. Circus at Bloomington, Illinois on July 29, 1953. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

often stayed at the Y. Many of the people had their own trailers.

Eldon "Red" Sleeter, a Bloomington aerialist, attended Illinois State Normal University [now Illinois State University] for a time, off and on. He and his wife, Mitzi, practiced at the Y and the Ward Barn. Doris Sleeter, who lives in Bloomington and works at State Farm, is Red's sister.

During the depression people came back to Bloomington to work. Many went to Peoria for work for the WPA.

Bloomingtonites who have done the difficult triple somersault are Art Concello; Wayne Larey, the "John Ringling of Australia;" and Ernie Lane. Tony Steele, the most recent person to do the triple, is with the Flying Malkos, who make Bloomington their headquarters.

#### Interview with Harry Melby, April 18, 1957.

Mr. Melby came to the Bloomington YMCA in 1927 to find the circus project already going. It had been a custom for YMCAs in general to do some project with a circus theme, but these attempts were only amateur. The Bloomington Y featured professional circus acts. At one time, Mr. Melby calculated that if the Y had paid the talent appearing there in cash, the salaries would have amounted to about \$7000. Instead of cash, the performers were allowed the privilege of practicing in the Y.

In its beginnings the circus was given for only a few days, Wednesday through Saturday and usually in March. The gym, however, had to be closed to the public at least a week even for the few days of performance, so it was decided to run the circus for the whole week with a matinee on Saturdays. From these circuses, Mr. Melby estimated that the Y made from \$2,000 to \$3,000.

The circus featured usually seven or eight professional acts with dancing schools or other little groups contributing acts.

Sometimes the performers ran into a bit of bad luck, i.e., they could not appear because of another engagement. Harry La Mar, who was always at the Y, guaranteed Mr. Melby that the show would always have a flying act.

The depression had no adverse affect on the Y circus. On the contrary, since the performers themselves were out of work, they were looking for something to do. Performances were almost always sell-outs because the entertainment was cheap. The greatest difficulty encountered was the draft during World War II, which broke up many acts.

The circus at the Y died without lingering. In 1941, C. D. Curtis, who had been with the Y for 18 years, was called to do U.S.O. a month before the March circus. The other directors got together and divided up the week to put on the biggest circus they ever had. In 1942, there were evidently not enough performers, and the circus was dropped.

The young boys around the Y were wild to learn about trapeze work. Mr. Melby recounted the incident of one boy climbing from the running ramp which circled the gym onto a pedestal and swinging off. Naturally he couldn't get back, and let him self drop into the net, despite warnings, emerging with an injured ankle.

Art Concello was the most famous of Y boys. He belonged to the Y, and was discovered by C. D. Curtis who called him a "natural." Curtis helped straighten the boy out: Art had been considered a "devil" around the Y; it was believed that he would either go to the circus or St. Charles reformatory.

Red Sleeter worked at the Y while in high school. He continued his education at both Illinois Wesleyan, and George Williams College, planning to enter YMCA work. He stayed only a short time at George Williams, got going with the circus, married, divorced, eventually got to Australia where he began to manage the Wirth circus, marrying one of the owners.

The rigging was eventually removed from the Y because it interfered with other things. During a remodeling, the ramp around the gym was taken down, reducing the spectator space.

Lorraine Valentine, Normal aerialist, said that Mr. Melby was a really true friend of circus people, and who gave them all sorts of help.



Arthur Concello, on left, was the most famous graduate of the Bloomington YMCA. Others in picture are his wife Antoinette and Eddie Ward, Jr. Publicity photo from Ringling-Barnum 1936. Pfening Archives.

#### Interview with Lorraine Valentine, April 18, 1957.

Two years ago, when Harry Melby left the position of director of the YMCA, the Y closed its doors to show people.

Those acts which came to Bloomington were varied: all aerial acts, tumbling and other acrobatic acts were represented in the Y shows. There was a great deal of ill feeling toward the Y when it closed its doors to circus people for, as Mrs. Valentine said, they had given their services and then they were turned out.

The town benefitted by the presence of all these people. Especially the Woolen Mills store from which, in Ward's time, the wardrobe materials were bought. The store carried all kinds of materials performers could use.

In regard to the practice center her husband had proposed to build, Mrs. Valentine said that it was not carried out because the City Council would not allow them to put a trailer court on their property. Today, however, people stop for a while in the summer. Animal acts find it hard to park any place in the city, and often





Eddie Ward's famous training barn, incubator of great flyers. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

come to the Valentine barn.

Mrs. Valentine repeatedly referred to Bloomington's fame in the circus world. She said that in show business the city was referred to as "the capital of the world." It was a good show town, i.e. it was easy to work sites out of Bloomington; it was near Chicago and many dates in indoor circuses during the winter. There was a great distance and lots of expense to come from the south to play a northern Shrine date.



The Flying Valentines, 1943. George Valentine, Sue Peltó and Lorraine Valentine. Pfening Archives.

Mrs. Valentine got into the business in 1932. She and her husband wintered quite a bit in Houston, Texas. They played fairs, indoor circuses, and celebrations, not traveling with a circus.

With so many acts wintering in the city—there were 20 to 30 at one time—it was difficult to get time to practice at the Y since the practice schedule had fit into the Y's regular program.

Mrs. Valentine's troupe is now known as The Valentine Sisters with her daughter Cherie. In 1939 the original Valentine act was awarded a plaque and named the best flying act in the United States in a *Billboard* sponsored contest. Mrs. Valentine recalled that there was some practice done at the Western Avenue Community Center in Bloomington, but nothing organized.

Mrs. Valentine has many pictures of old performers which used to decorate the walls of her home. She further suggested that Al Grabbs of Bloomington was a good source of information regarding the Majestic Theatre practice site. He used to work in the band there.

#### Interview with Bert Doss, April 19, 1957.

Bert Doss got into the circus business in 1918, retiring in 1932. In 1927 he organized the Flying Thrillers with Bob Brooks and Harold Voise. Before this act he was with Charlie Waller's Flying Fishers in 1918, joining the Wards that winter.

Mr. Doss said that in regard to practice centers, the Chaterton Opera House was used by stage acts. Lester Thomas, a Ward product, was the only flying act to use the Western Avenue Community Center to his knowledge.

The Ward Barn, he stated, was used solely by Ward's acts, a policy that continued when Art Concello owned the place. When Ward died, the estate went into holding by the McLean County Bank because of a mortgage. In the interim, until Concello bought it, Doss had made a deal with the bank to use it and rent it to other acts, the income being used to pay down the mortgage. When Mrs. Ward couldn't meet the payments, Concello bought it from the estate.

Living quarters for many performers were near the Ward Barn. The girls from the Wards acts lived on Emerson and Linden Streets. Their place was named the Briarwood Mansion by Mr. Doss, he said, because of the briarwood nearby. Mr. Doss had bought a home on Colton Avenue. Jim Arbaugh, Herb Fleming, and some others from the Ward acts also lived on this street. This general area was what became known as "Trapeze Terrace."

The ice house Mr. Doss described was that one at Haffer's Pond. The building was large enough to accommodate the large chunks of ice made there and hence was ideal. Early on, when it was used for practice, sawdust was packed around the ice and would be left on the floor when the ice was gone, providing some safety since there were no nets at the time.

The round-house which was used for practice was torn down about thirty years ago. There is now a coal yard on the site.

Sue Peltó, on left, and Lorraine Valentine as the Valentine Sisters. Publicity photo from 1952. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.







The Bloomington YMCA, another legendary site in flying trapeze history. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

The circus season, in Mr. Doss' time, lasted about thirty-eight to forty weeks, from April to November. Performers received a weekly salary, and having no place to spend it during their travels, accumulated it to spend during the winter off-season. Mr. Doss said that he reached a salary level of \$45 per week during the 1920's.

A particular circus might be more popular in some sections of the country than others, although the route always varied somewhat. A typical route of the Sells-Floto show at the time Mr. Doss was with it opened in Chicago with a run to Hammond and onto the industrial areas in the spring. From there it moved up into New England, returning to Chicago in July, then to Denver, Seattle, the Pacific Coast, ending in Texas in the fall.

Performers came back to Bloomington because it was the original home of many of them and the adopted home of about the



The Flying Thrillers, Bert Doss, on left, Mitzi and Eldon "Red" Sleeter. Cole Bros. Circus back yard, Hammond, Indiana, August 3, 1935. Pfening Archives.

same number. There were no places to be found for practicing during the winter in the surrounding area.

And in Bloomington, Mr. Doss stated, one place they bought wardrobe material was Clem's.

When the weather became nice, those acts which played fairs, etc. using different rigging than circus acts, would set up their apparatus outside for rehearsal.

When Eddie Ward, Sr. died, Doss took Eddie, Jr. and broke him into the flying business as a catcher. Someone snatched him away after a year.

Mr. Doss explained that he and his wife and Emmett Kelly set up the Shifters Club, a social club, Doss was president for the one season it lasted. The membership, which amounted to 30, was composed of all types of performers, entertaining themselves usually by playing rummy. There was a ten cent fine imposed for using profane language, trials in kangaroo court, applications for membership (which were sometimes denied kiddingly with instructions to try later), and dues and membership fees, which came to \$2.00. At the end of the season, the club held a grand banquet with the money it had collected. There were other clubs formed: The Nut Club and The Kinkers Club.

Mr. Doss has a collection of photos of circus aerialists from Bloomington decorating a wall of his roller rink.

#### Interview with Dr. Arley Gillett, April 25, 1957.

In 1928 Dr. O. E. Horton organized a Gamma Phi gymnastic group at Illinois State Normal University. Dr. Horton was a graduate of Springfield College, Massachusetts, which specialized in training YMCA instructors. He came to ISNU from Ohio Wesleyan, where there was a movement to organize a national honorary gymnastic fraternity.

The national angle of the group, which was primarily for male P.E. majors, never came to fruition. Other schools were not interested; however, there had been correspondence among the schools which favored the idea.

Until 1941, the group was composed solely of men. Women had participated in the circuses put on by the organization, but were not members. These women were mainly from those professional acts which came to Bloomington or local dancing or baton twirling students.

Professional people influenced the Gamma Phi circus. Some came to advise, Harry Waters and Jimmy Olsen, for example; others loaned equipment. Gene Enos gave his perch pole and globe. Some of the best acts in the Gamma Phi circus reciprocated by performing in the YMCA spring circuses.

The first acts in the Gamma Phi circus consisted of floor acts: tumbling and parallel bars, acts normally seen in gymnastic competition. The first aerial act was swinging ladders followed by the cloud swing. After the war, web acts and trapeze were added. The routines on the web, ladders, and cloud swings were exactly like those in professional circuses.

One professional person who began at ISNU was J.R. Fenton. He began with Dr. Gillett in grade school, becoming interested in tumbling and trampoline. He worked out, while in high school, with Gamma Phi, which was small at the time, going to the Y later. From the Y, he went with the La Mar troupe. Dr. Gillette said Fenton had coordination and ability.

#### Interview with Harry Foreman, April 29, 1957.

Mr. Foreman got into the flying business in 1907 with his uncle's act, the Flying La Mars. At that time there were only three flying acts from Bloomington: The Flying La Mars, The Flying La Vans, and the Flying Fishers.

The practice centers used in his early career included Holmes Ice-House on Haffer's Pond, where the Lakeside Country Club is now; the roundhouse on Gridley Street; and the ice-house on Robinson and Gridley Streets.



In the Holmes ice-house, there was no stove. The men had to dress at home and ride out there, practicing in heavy sweaters. Usually when they got there, ice would be on the net. It would be very cold. The roundhouse was used by his uncle when Mr. Foreman was being used in the casting act [about 1903]. In 1915 Mr. Foreman used the Chatterton Opera House only once when he practiced there with his stage flying trapeze act. He said that he was the only one to use it. The Coliseum was also in use when he started.

Ed La Mar's flying act in 1909 consisted of Henry Frenz, Charlie Waller, Freddie Johnson, and Charlie Grist. Johnson left La Mar in 1911 to go with Clyde Noble's stage flying act. Mr. Foreman then took his place.

The old Letter Laundry, on the corner of Washington and East Streets, was a practice site in 1909. This was the site of the old Majestic Theatre.

The Y was really Mr. Foreman's practice center. He and C.D. Curtis installed permanent rigging there in 1912 or 1913. Before this time, stage flying acts put up their own rigging. Curtis and Bernard Smith began the Y circuses in 1922 or 1923. In the same tradition, both Lloyd Evers and Harry Melby were great supporters and friends of show people.

The biggest act in the show's history was the 16 person flying group in 1936, made up of four catchers and a dozen flyers. It was composed of the following troupes: Harry La Mar's Flying La Mars, Charlie Waller's Flying Fishers, the Croutshers brothers Flying Sensations, Herb Fleming's act, the Flying Wards, and Bob Fisher's act.

Louie Probasco also appeared in this act. He was a great friend of the show people. Not a professional himself, he volunteered his services to acts which needed a temporary leaper. He took no salary. His training had begun when he worked out in the Y on the parallel bars just for fun.

Mr. Foreman commented on the Wards. He had never been to the barn except once in 1918. After coming back from the war, he joined the Flying Nelsons, and practiced at Ward's for a week. But of the Wards in particular, Mr. Foreman said that they began their flying act in 1916. Previously they had had a double trapeze act.

Other double trapeze acts were the Aerial Smiths and the Flying La Fayettes.

Professionals had never been allowed to practice at ISNU. They had been barred from Gamma Phi shows.

The Y came to an end when Mr. Cecil Rowe succeeded Melby as director. Circus people are critical of Rowe for tearing down the rigging. Two years ago, Mr. Foreman had gone to South America, but was told by Don Eddy of the Y that the Y was going to remove the running track from the gym, and that Mr. Foreman could take this into consideration and get a new net put up. When Mr. Foreman returned, all the rigging with the exception of his net had been discarded. The idea that practice would be continued had been given by Eddy, but it was discontinued for no reason.

The removal of the rigging killed the tradition of the Y which many people talked about. In fact, all the gymnastic equipment was removed, removing all possibility of inspiration to young boys. The young boys at the Y had been the sources of all the flyers, according to Mr. Foreman.

The feeling of the town toward the circus activity, Mr. Foreman said, is like that toward a shot pigeon. Of the 75 people who once came to Bloomington, there are about 15 left. They include such acts as the Valentine's, La Mar's, Sid Smith's and Marian Scherer's.

Mr. Foreman quit the business two years ago because of a heart attack, but his act goes on.

#### **Interview with Walter Werdebaugh, May 25, 1957.**

Mr. Werdebaugh began with a casting act in 1916 in Reading, Pennsylvania. The act played vaudeville. When an accident in the original act eliminated one of the members, Mr. Werdebaugh, who had hung around the place and acquired some experience, was taken on. The owner of the act had to assume responsibility because of Mr. Werdebaugh's age. Mr. Werdebaugh retired in 1931.

In 1921, he found that Charlie Waller, who had the Five Flying Fishers, was in need of a catcher, and he wrote to him. Mr. Werdebaugh had begun as a leaper in the casting act until he became too heavy, converting to a catcher. But the strain put on a catcher in a casting act caused him to fore sake that type of act.

When he came to Bloomington, Mr. Werdebaugh, and the Fishers act practiced at the Meyers Brewery, now Highland Park. The Fishers played fairs and parks and needed out-door practice before beginning the season. Therefore, when the weather became warm, the act would set up their outdoor rigging and the Three Eye Ball Park. The practice at the brewery was from 1921-22. The building was torn down in 1924.

Mr. Werdebaugh appeared with the Siegrist troupe in the Ringling-Barnum Circus in 1924. He was with the Five Fearless Flyers in 1927. This troupe was managed by Bob Fisher, real name Bob Musselman, a brother-in-law of Charlie Waller, owner of the Five Flying Fishers.

While with the Charlie Waller act, Mr. Werdebaugh lived with him in the Baines Edition. He lived with Bob Fisher in his home when with that troupe.

The report Mr. Werdebaugh gave on the Hagenbeck-Wallace train wreck had been told to him. He said that a troupe train had pulled into a siding, but was too large for it and jugged out. Many of the performers who weren't killed were crippled and had to leave their acts. The circus world was shocked at the accident.

Costumes all had to be made and repaired by the acts themselves, the women's job. The women built and designed the costumes with the exception of tights. The circus management provided costumes only for the parades, opening spectacles, or women's acts such as statue numbers.

The circus parades didn't do anything for the circuses, Mr. Werdebaugh said. They were costly in that they required more cars to carry costumes for it. After World War I the parades were eliminated. Ringling was the first after the 1920 season.

The life in the circus, Mr. Werdebaugh said, was a good life. What lay people draw as a picture of a circus performer is usually that of the "roughneck," a circus laborer who sets up and takes down the circus property. Mr. Werdebaugh had traveled and had plenty of free time because flying acts came late in the performance, and one would have free time before and after both performances. Usually after the final show, the flyers would get together for a big meal before catching the circus train to the next stop.

On these trains, the single men and women were kept in separate cars. Occasionally some single men would be in the married couple's cars. On the lot, however, the whole show was one big family.

Vaudeville shows in the winter were good or bad depending on the circuit one played. The Keith and Orpheum circuits had the large theatres. In fairs and parks, booking was done through an agency which sold acts through catalogs. These acts moved along with all their equipment and costumes in a semi.

Often in the winter, the larger acts might throw together a small group to play vaudeville or perhaps a benefit show. This was often the case with Ray Hendrix, Lester Thomas, and Mr. Werdebaugh.



When Mr. Werdebaugh was with Charlie Weller from 1926 to 1928, the troupe often practiced at the Ward barn. Even though Ward reserved the barn mainly for his own people, he sometimes allowed some friends to come in. However, they had to practice with his group.

Particular places in the United States are known for certain types of acts: Reading, Pennsylvania for its ground tumbling and casting acts; Baraboo, Wisconsin, for riding acts; and Bloomington for the flying acts, which accounted for 90% of flying acts in the country. Mr. Werdebaugh accounted for this by saying that people in similar acts tend to congregate, and if a certain type of act gets its start in a certain city, it attracts others.

Mr. Werdebaugh described C.D. Curtis with whom he did some training. Curtis was not a large man, only about 5'9" and 170 pounds, and a genial good mixer.

In 1924, when Mr. Werdebaugh was playing with Ringling-Barnum in Texas, a hoof and mouth epidemic broke out. Other states wouldn't allow the circus animals to enter. They played throughout Texas then to packed houses even on twenty-four hours notice.

Mr. Werdebaugh said that although Art Concello is publicly known to have invented the folding seat wagons used by Ringling until last year, the real inventor was Lester Thomas.

#### Appendix

"World's Aerialist Capital," by Robert A. Barracks, staff reporter for the *Decatur* (Illinois) *Herald and Review*, Sunday Supplement, November 13, 1932.

High up in the shadows of the vaulted roof, a girl stands poised on a narrow perch. She watches intently as a man far below and in front of her "pumps" at his trapeze, gaining momentum for his swing.

Outside a driving wind swirls cold rain against the windows. A shovel clanks as a man in an overcoat and gloves stokes corncocks into a big furnace that roars in a valiant but futile attempt to take the chill off the huge barn-like structure.

A three-years-old youngster bundled in wooly cat, cap and mittens, plays with long rows of half-ripened tomatoes and cabbages rescued from the first frost and spread on the earth floor under the life net.

Agnes Doss doing her single trapeze act on Sells Floto in 1930. Pfening Archives.



On the ground, at the edge of the net, stands a young man in suede leather jacket, his gloved hands grasping a heavy rope that disappears in the shadows of the roof 40 feet above. He watches intently as the man on the trapeze lengthens his swing.

"All right now Agnes," he says. "Let's do it this time. Watch your beat; and you," this time he is addressing the man on the trapeze, who by this time has dropped to a "hook" or knee hold on the bar, "give her the time a split second sooner."

The girl shivers and rubs her hands on her pink silk tights. "All right, Bert," she says.

The swinging man has swung his feet from the bar, sent them under and up until his ankles are locked in the angle between bar and swing ropes. He lets loose the bar, swings head down for a moment, and then comes his sharp cry:

"Now!"

Swift as light, the girl's slight figure shoots from her 30 foot perch. The trapeze bar she grasps sends her in a long arc toward the net under which her daughter plays contentedly, then up.

"Break!" comes the sharp command of the man on the ground.

Her knees bend, and as she nears the top of the swing, she leaves the bar in a swift somersault. There is a breathless moment as her spinning, falling body and the swinging man rush toward each other. His outstretched hands reach out for her ankles. It seems that only a fraction of an inch separates them—and then his swing has reached its limits and he starts back. They have missed.

The man on the ground is hauling swiftly on his rope. There is a screech of pulleys high overhead—the ropes tighten on the wide belt around the girl's waist and a moment before she crashes to the net below, her fall is arrested. She bounds once in the net and then walks to the edge in that peculiar "prancing" gait one must use in walking on the heavy meshes.

She stands looking expectantly at the man on the ground. The man on the trapeze has swung back to his seat on the bar and is also looking at the man on the ground.

The object of their attention removes a glove and ruefully rubs a rope burn on one of his fingers. Nobody says a word for a minute, then:

"Your break was a little too soon, Agnes," he says. "Eddie, I think your swing was a little low. Let's try it again."

The big man on the trapeze smiles encouragingly at the girl. "You did that fine, Agnes," he said. "I should have caught you."

"No, Eddie," she smiles back, "It was my fault. It must be awfully dark up there, I don't see how you can see to catch me at all. The light is very bad. I'll do better next time," and she "prances" over to a narrow rope ladder and starts the thirty-foot climb back to her platform, her safety ropes trailing. Eddie starts to work up his swing again.

Next summer these same people will be doing this same thing, but in a different setting. Then, there will be blaring bands, spangled costumes and thousands of thrilled spectators to cheer them in their work, but in order that the million or more circus fans of this and other nations may get their annual thrill in watching these daring artists of the high trapeze, the artists must put in long hours each day of the winter, perfecting daring feats to satisfy their public.

In Bloomington, where Bert Doss, his wife Agnes, and Eddie Ward, Jr., of the famous "Flying Burtons," headliners of the Sells-Floto Circus aerial acts live and train each winter, first-rank aerialists have been a tradition for almost half a century.

Bloomington may be noted for other things, but in the circus profession it is known all over the world as the city that turns out more big-time aerial acts than any other place in the world.



"I was given a booking in London once," said Frank Noble gray-haired veteran of the flying bars who now presides over the jewelry and novelty department of a Bloomington department stores and is a mine of professional lore.

"I didn't know how they came to choose my act and inquired when I got overseas. They told me that they needed a flying act, had heard of us, and just wrote to Bloomington, knowing that we probably lived there. Bloomington for circus acts and Reading, Pa., for stage acts is the rule in the profession."

Bloomington first got its start in the early '70's when the Greene barn on the edge of town was the gathering place for the boys of the old fourth ward school. Daily they would gather there after school was out to do "acts" on improvised trapezes with tons of fragrant hay as their only safety net.

The two Greene brothers developed into remarkable gymnasts, toured the United States and finally went to Europe with a Roman Ladder act. While there they were astounded by a new act, developed by an English troupe, the Hanlons, in which the performers swung from bar to bar, passing each other en route.

Returning to Bloomington they told some of their old school friends about it. These youths, inspired by the success of their friends had worked up an act of their own and were gaining a reputation here. Fred Miltmore, head of the new act, heard of the new development in Europe, and decided to try and work out something like it here. About that time his partner was killed and Charles Noble, brother of Frank, took his place.

Through some misunderstanding, Miltmore got the idea that the foreign act called for "flying" from one bar to another and catching one another en route. The danger involved in practicing such an act called for some kind of a safety net. None was available here, so the partners went to the Illinois River and engaged some market fishermen to make them a large net to spread under their rigging.

When the net was delivered and put up, hangers-on about the training quarters teased them unmercifully and called them a "bunch of fishermen" rather than aerialists. The act was perfected and when it took the road, the troupe was given the name of "The Flying Fishers," as a result of the "razzing" they had received. The Flying Fishers introduced "flying" to the American circus and played many seasons with Ringling's and other big shows here and abroad. Frank Noble later took over the act, took it to Europe with a six year booking that was cut short by the war in 1914. He later took it into vaudeville where it was a big attraction for years. Mr. Noble retired in 1917. Harry Green, of Bloomington, whose professional name is La Van, was still carrying on the act under that name until two years ago.

The next aerial act that Bloomington produced was Charles Smith's "Aerial Smiths" that played with Ringling's for years.

Eddie Ward of the "Flying Wards" was next, and his acts were and are probably the best known to circus fans. Eddie, who died a few years ago, started in the profession in 1906 with a double trapeze act on the Ringling show. He formed the Flying Wards later on. With a seven-member act the Wards played with Hagenbeck-Wallace for a number of years.

In 1918, in the tragic Hagenbeck-Wallace circus train wreck in Indiana, Jennie Ward, his sister and Bessie Boyer, a member of the troupe were among those killed. Eddie left the circus at the end of that season and played fairs until 1920. He enlarged the act to 9 members and went back to the circus in 1921 with the Carl [John] Robinson show. Ward had three nine-people acts going for a while. After his death his wife took over the business and is now carrying on on the coast. Eddie, Jr., his son, is also in the profes-



The Flying Wards, cr. 1920 during the period the act played vaudeville and fairs. Left to right, Ernie Lane, Mable (Hubble) Ward, Erma (Hubble) Ward, the great Eddie Ward, Jessie Hubble Arbaugh, and Bert Doss. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

sion and is catcher with Bert Doss and his act.

Bert Doss, who had been with the Wards for several years, formed an act with Harold Voise in 1927. Later, Voise formed his own act and Doss organized his "Flying Burtons" to play the 1932 season with Sells-Floto.

"It takes a lot of work, but if you are really interested in making a good aerialist and want progress, it is worth it," said Bert Doss, as he called "that's enough" to Mrs. Doss and Eddie Ward in the big training barn and came over to sit down on the plank bench near the furnace.

"It takes at least five years to make a good leaper, and that five years means a lot of real work, disappointment, and sometimes hard knocks.

"Aerialists are not born. Of course, lots of acts are 'inherited,' that is, a son will follow in his father's footsteps like Eddie Ward, Jr., but there has to be a start somewhere.

"Anyone who is not too heavy, is well developed muscularly and will work hard should make a good aerialist if started young enough. Of course you have to watch a youngster and be able to tell that will not put on flesh under rigorous training. . . . Most of the professionals develop from youngsters. That is one reason for the number of acts coming out of Bloomington. The young fellows hang around when the acts are training, get a chance to try it, and are developed, if they show promise. Schools and colleges with well equipped gymnasiums also provide a great deal of material these days."

The aerialist, just like the aviator, must learn ground work before really flying. They are put through a rigorous training on bars and other apparatus before they are sent aloft. Work on the Roman rings develops the back, arm and shoulder muscles. Doing flip-flops and other stunts on the ground makes the body strong and supple.

When he first goes aloft, the young flyer practices alighting in the net from various positions. This must always be done by dropping on the back or shoulders, for serious injuries come from alighting improperly.

When ready, a "mechanic" or safety belt, is placed around the candidate's middle and there refines the long training in proper



timing between the flyer and catcher. Timing is everything in aerial work, and every movement of the bar, flyer and catcher must be synchronized perfectly in order to make the tricks successful. It is estimated that the flyer is traveling at the rate of 40 miles per hour at the time he is caught and that means that a split-second in wrong timing is going to cause a miss.

The burden of calling the proper time of leaving the pedestal and bar falls on the catcher, in addition to having to snatch the flying body that is coming at him at a 40 mile per hour speed. The flyer must take his turn at catching, always, in order to perfect himself in timing.

After the technique of a trick is worked out, then comes long hours of "polishing" it, fitting music to the act, and development of poise, showmanship and grace which makes the aerialist's act truly artistic in every respect.

"Sometimes it takes only a few weeks to learn a new trick," said Mr. Doss. "You always lose it again, and the hard job is to regain it. That sometimes takes weeks, years and often one never gets it back so that he is sure of doing it in a performance."

"It is this fight that ruins many an aerialist. There is no room for temperament in the game, and team work is the first essential. You can't blame it on the other fellow if you knew it was partly your fault if a trick went wrong."

"The most general dislike in the aerial game is in working on a circus lot that is sloping. In the profession we call it 'gravity' and it is a mental hazard that is almost impossible to get away from."

"If the slope is uphill, or toward the catcher, the flyer invariably 'pushes' himself in his swing under the impression that he must overcome the 'grade' he thinks he is going up. If the slope is reversed, the flyer unconsciously holds back, in the belief that he is over-swinging. It is something that cannot be explained and one cannot get away from, but it is there and is very real to the aerialist."

"Sometimes one gets a 'hunch' about the rigging, and it is generally a good idea to check up before going on with the act, for one often finds something wrong that might have upset the act."

On a circus, when it is jumping from town to town, the laying out of the rigging or apparatus must be painstakingly done. Ordinarily each act carries a man who supervises this and in which the performers have confidence. The rigging is laid out on the ground under the canvas when the big top is spread, and goes up with the canvas. Then, by an elaborate system of wires and guys, it is leveled and braced so that there is no sway. On wet days, extra precautions must be taken, for canvas and ropes shrink up and throw the equipment out of adjustment.

The movies have given another outlet for the aerialist's professional ability and several feature films centered about the circus have been filmed in recent years have provided winter employment for many performers.

The Doss act had a large part in the making of "Tarzan and the Apes," in which the swimmer Johnny Weismuller was featured. Bert Doss instructed Weismuller in the scenes in which he was shown swinging about in the jungle treetops, and in many of the more difficult shots, Doss doubled for the star. He and his act, together with several other aerial acts on the coast at the time, played the parts of apes in the picture and had a grand and remunerative time swinging about it the trees.

"Weismuller is a great fellow, although it took him a long time to get used to working high," said Doss. "He was a little shy about



The Aerial Smiths, Aida and Charles, one of the early Bloomington trapeze acts. Pfening Archives.

swinging about far above the ground, but he tried hard, and soon overcame his aversion to air work."

Many performers also had parts in Marion Davies' film, "Polly of the Circus," and similar movies. At the present time, Mayme Ward, widow of Eddie Ward, has her act on the coast in the filming of a movie of the Robinson shows.

There have been a few new developments in aerial acts in the last few years. Most of the tricks done by various acts are the same or adaptations of the same tricks. The most difficult trick is the "two-and-a-half and pirouette to the feet," which, in plain language is two and a half somersaults by the flyer, then a vertical spin, ending up with the leaper being caught by the heels. This trick is easy for Doss, he says, while others, more simple, are hard. The triple somersault is a trick that is very seldom done consistently by many acts.

Just now a half-dozen acts are training in Bloomington, acts that will go out in the spring to play top positions on circus bills all over the country. They are the new generation of many other headliners who have come from Bloomington in the last half century and have made that Central Illinois city known over the world as the home of circus aerialists.



An editorial published upon the wreath-laying ceremony at the grave of Eddie Ward, Bloomington, Illinois *Pantagraph*, August, 25 1929.

Associations distinctly different from those of other men are recalled by the act of passing aerialists. While the two graves are like all others [Ward, buried in Park Hill Cemetery; Leo Hendryx, buried in St. Mary's Cemetery]; while the stones merely perpetuate names common enough . . . the lives of the two men were far different from other lives. Bonds of friendship with fellow acrobats symbolized in the wreaths are peculiar to a profession the national headquarters of which have long been in Bloomington.

When Clyde Noble laid a circlet of leaves and flowers upon the sod, the act brought back years of contact under the common bond of showmanship.

Travelers together, each day in a new city, each night en route on a show train, the bonds of showmen are closer than those of other persons. Every tented city is raised again and the act goes on, always a unit, always an organized corporation, always a repetition of the day before. But in contrast with this, every day the show is in a different direction from a different town; on different land, with a different route to the sleeping cars; with a different collection of houses about a courthouse, statehouse or post office; with a different mob collecting at the main entrance and a different sea of faces in the bleachers and reserved seats.

The quality of sameness in the tented city and railroad life is

The magnificent Flying Ward troupe on Sells-Floto in 1924. Top row, left to right, Clara Bell, Lillian Bell, Mabel Hubble, Margie Read, Mayme Ward, Nellie Sullivan, Mickey King, Erma (Hubble) Ward and Bee Starr. Front row, left to right, Ralph Duval, Eddie Ward, Bert Doss, Paul Sullivan, Harold Voise, George Read and Lester Thomas. Pfening Archives.

contrasted with the quality of different in everything else. The combination makes very close friends. Mutual loves and hates are increased. There is no way of avoiding, if one wants to, the persons with whom one does his turns in the tops. There is no way of forming an attachment, if one wants to, in the cities visited.

Under such conditions character reveals itself and stands for what it is. Desire for friendship, strong in every person, is keen. Surrounded every day by new crowds of unknown persons, the lonely lives of actors find solace in mutual confidence. Each helps the other. The Sells-Floto wreaths symbolize such attachment.

Another attachment is commemorated by those wreaths. Each day the band plays the cycle of music. Each day the jugglers follow the grand entry, the clowns follow the jugglers, the bareback riders follow the clowns and so on through the performance. Each day the rim of the big three-ring platter under the main top fills with colors and faces, then empties. Each day the flyers stand in tights on their elevated perch and look down upon the rim; forget it, then watch the swing of the trapeze; drop off into space; use centrifugal force to bring them above it; launch whirling into space in perfectly-timed circle to be caught, swung, turned and returned to the moving trapeze bar.

Each day a sound like a distant waterfall flows up from the rim, flows against the echo-less canvas, dies away again. Upon this repetition of daily occurrences the performer becomes dependent.

It is something to make life glow with pride and make life sad with the difficulty of doing anything to change it. This same combination of emotions, present in each of the flyers, is an uncommon bond. Each understands the other. The routine becomes an unforgettable event that the loss of a comrade does not alter. The interdependence of the flyers, the common bond of glory and gloom, makes a wreath upon an actor's grave mean much to the actors themselves.





# I MEET MY HUSBAND'S FRIENDS

The Wife of a Circus Fan Meets Interesting Dwellers in Spangleland

By Faye O. Braathen

*Faye Oretta Bentley was born on Christmas Day, 1894 in Anderson, Iowa. She attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison where she received a bachelor of arts degree in 1918. From there she taught history and social studies at the State Normal School in Mayville, North Dakota. The next year she met Sverre Oscar Braathen, a native of Mayville. They were wed in Freeport, Illinois on 14 September 1921. She died on 26 May 1976 in Madison, Wisconsin.*

*Her husband carried his childhood fascination with circuses into his adult life, amassing a huge collection of memorabilia, spending his vacations away from his law firm visiting circuses, shooting superb photos of shows and show people, and becoming friends with many showfolk. In retrospect it seems remarkable that Faye resisted the charms of Spangleland, as she called it, for so long, testament to the lingering prejudice against show people that lasted well into the twentieth century.*

*She wrote this piece in 1934. While this account is largely factual, she is off-base in placing Clyde Beatty on the Ringling-Barnum show under canvas. While the great cat man appeared on Ringling-Barnum in the early 1930s, it was only in Madison Square and Boston Gardens. Her reference to Alfredo Codona practicing a three and a half somersault is noteworthy. Neither Codona nor anyone else caught the three and a half until Tony Steele did it in 1962.*

*Thanks to Maureen Brunsdale and Mark Schmitt of the Special Collections and Rare Book Department of Milner Library at Illinois State University for providing both this article and the photos accompanying it. All the pictures in this article were taken by Sverre Braathen. Fred D. Pfening III*

Raised to be at least a pillar in a Fundamentalist church, my mind was long dominated by queer little spooks that stalked along such involutions as existed in its grey matter and whispered in tones that could not be denied, "Actors, performers, professional entertainers of any school are suspect; if you would preserve your own morals undefiled you will assiduously avoid contamination with any man or woman who earns a living thus." Being a very ardent Fundamentalist, I never sought to analyze the logic of these spook-exhortations. Just why I could be an acknowledged friend of the church's outstanding wits, who brought tears of merriment to my eyes as they cavorted at Sunday School picnics and missionary banquets, but must not so much as accept an introduction to a circus clown that provoked similar tears for similar reasons, I did not trouble to ask myself. Perhaps it is true that the devout are not overly analytical.

The particular cupid that used my heart for a target must have been a Modernist. Certain it is he was no Fundamentalist, for he sent me tripping to the altar with a man who not only reveled in his friendships with circus performers but who was very much given to analyzing any and all taboos. Soon I found I could maintain no semblance of logic in attempting to defend my reluctance to meet his performer friends. This, however, was not my real rea-

son for finally relegating my Fundamentalist spooks to the limbo. My husband, in addition to his sense of logic, knew his psychology — he piqued my curiosity, and I proved to be mere woman—I succumbed.

Never shall I forget my first introduction to the folk who inhabit that most interesting little country, Circusland. As was my wont, I had remained at home during the day, this while friend husband watched the "flying squadron" arrive at the "runs" about 3:00 o'clock that morning; had studied the workings of "snaking ropes," "snubbing posts," and other circus gadgets; had stood, a starry-eyed boy again, as the "twenty-four hour man" supervised the "torching of the road;" had greeted the arrival of the performers' section with eagerness, for it bore so many of his friends to him—debonair Clyde Beatty, author and star of *The Big Cage*; the aerial Clarkes, one of whom claims our Madison as his home; genial Eddie Woeckener, leader of the band and designer of clever Christmas cards with which he remembers his numerous friends each year; and a host of others. Promptly at 5:00 o'clock he arrived and greeted me in this wise, "Faye, you simply must come with me tonight and meet the Hannefords. I've offered them the last excuse for your absence that I am going to." I had a flashing realization of the embarrassment that must have been his during the several years of our marriage that I had consistently remained aloof from this particular group of his friends, and my position seems more untenable than ever. So I capitulated with the words, "I'll go with you, though I do hope Poodles' mother isn't as aristocratic as she appears in that ring." "You'll like her, I'll vouch for that," was his rejoinder.

So, with some timidity on my part and with what I secretly termed some temerity on my husband's part, we were soon ducking under some guy ropes and stepping over stakes and poles, wending our way amidst a maze of small tents in the "backyard" of Tentville, as we sought out the private dressing room of the great Hanneford family of bareback riders. Imagine my surprise and my delight to find "Mother" Elizabeth Hanneford, she of the stately grace and regal robes as she serves as equestrian director for that world famous circus

Faye Braathen; Poodles Hanneford; his daughter Gracie Hanneford; and his mother, the formidable Elizabeth Hanneford. Photo taken on Hagenbeck-Wallace lot, 27 August 1932, Rockford, Illinois.





act, sitting at a hand-driven sewing machine busily engaged in making an apron for Gracie, her pretty curly-haired granddaughter. She and the others of that charming family, gathered about Poodles 'neath the canvas canopy of their "veranda" to enjoy the "quiet hour," as that period between matinee and evening performance is called in circus parlance, greeted me with a warmth I have often found lacking in conventional drawing rooms. Instantly all the little Fundamentalist spooks were slain—not merely relegated to some temporary limbo but slain quite dead, as all such tormentors should be. One would have to be fossilized, indeed, not to respond to the genuine welcome the great Hanneford family extended to me on that hot August afternoon a few years ago. What a vote of gratitude I owe them. First impressions are such vital ones. I was a stranger in a very strange land, and had these first inhabitants whom I met greeted me with an icy aloofness (which my own long aloofness from them merited) some inner-me would not have survived and I should probably have missed much that has added zest to living in the years that have followed.

That first evening I met no other dwellers in Spangleland, for so enamored was I with the radiant personality of Poodles Hanneford and the kindness of his mother, wife, sister, and brother-in-law that there was no desire to leave the circle of their hospitality. Had not the accent which his mother gives to her speech told me they were English, the tea they frequently proffered us would have bespoken their nationality. They told us of their homes in the Adirondacks, of the training barns they maintain there, and of the broad-backed, white horses with the luxuriant manes and flowing tails that play so essential a role in the Hanneford act. They described for us the circus they give there each winter for the benefit of local charity when the country folk and the winter-resort guests assemble to watch the Hannefords not only ride their white chargers but turn summersaults on tight wires, enact daring feats on flying trapeze, spin in rapid revolutions suspended by their teeth from high ropes, and in numerous other ways prove that they represent the second, third, and fourth generations of circus folk.

Mother Hanneford's silken white hair escaped in ringlets about her forehead and the nape of her neck, thus answering for me my unspoken question when I first beheld her two granddaughters with their wealth of blonde curls hanging to their shoulders. This woman's life spans the bridge that lies between the little, family-owned circus of mud-wagon days in Europe and the gigantic amusement enterprise in three and four sections of double-length railway cars in modern America. As we sat there with the twilight of that day in late August closing in, Mother Hanneford wove a veritable spell about us as she related in her inimitable way accounts of experiences she and her late husband shared as bride and groom taking their own little circus from village to village in laughter-loving Ireland. I could scarce believe my ears when I was finally told that it was 7:30 and that if our hosts were to have time to dress and were to have time to find our seats "opposite the band" ere the fan-fare announced the entry of the spectacle of pageantry we must bid adieu to these new-found friends. With a spontaneity that surprised me, so like was it to that characteristic of my husband's which had always amazed and puzzled me, I said farewell, with this reservation, "I'll be seeing you again before the season ends, and I do hope you won't be too busy to finish the story about the Catholic Father that saved your little show from the mountain boys who threatened to wreck it." Three days later, on another lot, Mother Hanneford concluded that tale for me and charmed me with several others equally intriguing.

A short week after my introduction to the Hannefords, my husband and I drove one hundred miles before to greet the arrival at

the "runs" of the fourth section of the Greatest Show on earth. The first to espy us as we stood in the cool of breaking dawn was Mme. Bradna and her equestrian-director husband, Fred Bradna, who keeps the show moving with the dispatch and alacrity that is so predominating a characteristic of a circus. They were eager to get out to the lot where already a tented city was arising from the meadowlands, and we were quite as eager that they should permit us to transport them thither. Mme. Bradna chatted of circus parades, still delighting in the fact that the larger circuses had abolished such. Her graphic account of the hardships imposed upon the performers by these spectacles of wonders took from them much of the glitter and glamour circus parades had held for me since a child. Arrived at the lot, Mme. Bradna excused herself with the explanation that several cages of pedigreed dogs and others of pastel-hued pigeons demanded her immediate supervision. Fred Bradna of course could not tarry with us then, for innumerable details demand his attention through most of the day, so we were soon on our way back to the "runs" to seek out some other group of performers as they emerged from their railway state-rooms.

As we approached the railroad yards my husband recognized three black haired, olive skinned young ladies carrying small bags and walking towards the lot. He drew up beside them a bit hesitantly, not sure they remembered him. Circus girls are exceedingly careful to permit no stranger to accost them and none are more wary than the Rubio sisters. It was with considerable relief, therefore, that the expression of recognition in the dancing black eyes of the oldest of the sisters who chaperons the two younger girls who are carving an ever greater name for themselves in circus annals. She spoke of their introduction by Luisita Leers the previous season, and when each had greeted me they gladly accepted our invitation to ride to the lot.

These talented girls come each season from their home in Spain to entertain and delight their American audiences. Their dark eyes sparkled with deep pleasure when I complimented them on the artistry of their unique act. At the lot we assisted them in locating the site of the dressing tent, which was still only a skeleton of newly driven stakes and ribs of unrolled canvas. Sitting atop their

Karl Wallenda and Faye Braa-then, Ringling-Barnum lot, 7 August 1934, Freeport, Illinois.



trunks we talked with them of their triumphs of Madison Square Garden that spring and of other topics of conversation peculiar to circusdom, until a young girl with an auricle of golden curls came tripping through the sawdust between the rows of trunks. Recognizing my husband, she called out gaily, "Hello Mr. Braa-then. I am so glad to see you again. How are you?" I was introduced to Helen Wallenda. She was about seventeen then and had already proven to be a very bright star in that galaxy assembled by Ringling Bros. and Barnum &



Bailey. Helen was eager that I should meet her brother[!] Karl, the top mounter in their daring act, so bidding the Rubio sisters good-bye, we followed her through tangles of ropes and piles of stakes in search of the red wagon that serves this troupe as a dressing room. I now count Karl Wallenda as one of my very good friends, and one of my most prized possessions is a framed, autographed picture of him in tuxedo that hangs in our "gallery of stars" in our summer home, The White Tops, on the shores of Lake Waubesa. Many of the hours I have spent listening to him relate some interesting experience of his in Circusland have merged into a general memory of delightful hours spent beside that red wagon dressing room, but not so that first meeting with him a few years ago. His joy in having an American woman seek an introduction to him, a German circus performer, illumined his face and gave a sparkle to his conversation that is etched indelibly on my mind. I remember so eagerly he introduced me to his wife and little daughter, and to his brothers, Herman and Joseph. His open-mindedness and receptivity, his quest for more knowledge of American customs and habits was refreshing, and I found myself wondering what would happen if pupils in our schools and students in our colleges were to exhibit a fraction of this thirst for knowledge. His parting with me that day will illustrate the point I seek to make. I proffered my hand to Karl and he took it eagerly and said, with a frankness we seldom meet among our sophisticated American youth, "Tell me, please, how am I to know when I shake hands with a lady? You offer me your hand, and in New York one time I was laughed at because I offered to shake hands with a lady when she was leaving."

The previous season I had not watched the entire act the Wallendas offered because it was so desperately daring that I could not bring myself to study it as I had many other performances. It was something of a surprise to me, therefore, that I found on this particular afternoon I watched every move they made, nerves taut for fear these new found friends of mine should meet the death they actually seem to court. As I watched them construct that human pyramid far out on the cable and then proceed to cross to the far platform, Helen's sailor cap of shimmering satin barely clearing the canvas dome of the tent, I agreed with their fellow performer who had that morning remarked to us, "Their act should be entitled, 'Courting Suicide.'" Personally, I believe American audiences would appreciate the work of this daring group just as much if they used a safety net, as the law requires that they do in their native country. A most delightful letter just arrived from Helen Wallenda by this mail and she proudly writes, "We have taken out our first papers and shall soon be American citizens, so we are very happy."

Just as we turned away from the Wallendas, my husband was hailed in the heartiest fashion imaginable by a man of small stature and sprightly step, who spoke with an accent that marked him for a Spaniard. He came eagerly through the maze of ropes to greet us, and I was introduced to none other than Mons. Maximo, that mirth-provoking Cuban wonder of the slack wire who has both delighted and amazed audiences the world around for a quarter of a century. As he shook hands with me he said, "Now at last, Mr. Braathen, your wife will meet my wife," and fitting his actions to his words he led us to a shady spot in the backyard. There languorously reclining in a canvas chair we found diminutive, exotically beautiful Marie Maximo, daughter of those two lands of Romance, Italy and Japan. Her blue-black hair is of the Orient, but its propensity for waving softly back from her fair skin and dreamy, dark eyes are of the Occident.

A sage once remarked, "Beauty is as beauty does," and by this

token Marie Maximo is twice beautiful, for one must search far, indeed, to find a more interesting and altogether charming woman. Equally at home in the austerity of a circus dressing room or the luxury of a drawing room, she will discourse for hours on the various phases of art. It was she who described to a friend of



Faye Braathen, Marie Maximo, and Dr. Tom Tormey, circus fan. Photo taken on Ringling-Barnum lot, 6 August 1934, Madison, Wisconsin.

mine the tale that inspired a great artist to weave a tapestry of rare appeal which has long hung in my friend's home, admired but with its story one of mere conjecture. Marie (Maximo pronounces her name "Maray," in that liquid tongue he speaks) will tell you interesting stories of the glorious temples that intrigue the traveler in the "Land of the Rising Sun," and she knows whereof she speaks for she has spent days drinking deep of their beauty. When the blue flag is run up on the cook tent announcing to those versed in circus ways that dinner is served, she will graciously invite you to be her guest that the conversation may be continued, and it would take an ascetic, indeed, to refuse her invitation. Remain for a time in the company of these two dwellers in Spangleland, however, and with a deftness that marks Marie for a diplomat of the first water she has turned the conversation over to Max, and with that you will find yourself off on a veritable trip on a magic carpet.

Max holds his listeners enraptured with tales of adventure that would do credit to Scheherazade or Richard Halliburton. With a superb sense of appreciation for the element of suspense, he related to me an experience he had as guest of honor at a beheading party staged in an Asiatic principality. With great glee he described for me an occasion on which he outwitted a band of highwaymen in China. With a twinkle in his eye he told the

Faye Braathen, Alfredo Codona, and Dorothy Joy, wife of circus fan Harper Joy. Photo taken on Ringling-Barnum lot, 29 July 1933, Madison, Wisconsin.





story of the French lady married to a high Chinese official who sought through the age-old language of the fan to inveigle Max into an "affair" and of the difficulties he encountered in leaving the country because he had spurned his overtures.

As we chatted that August day with Max and Marie, their good friend Alfredo Codona came by, noted our presence, stopped to greet my husband, and soon I was quite enamored of his conversational talents as well. He, too, has played in every port from New York to Sydney and from Liverpool to Bombay and can match each tale Maximo relates with one of his own, quite as thrilling. So wide is Alfredo's fame, that I scarce need to state here that he is the man who has routinely executed this triple somersault from flying trapeze to flying trapeze twice each day during the circus seasons since he was a stripling of perhaps fifteen. Hurt last season at the opening of the show in Madison Square Garden and thus prevented from working the balance of the season, he is now striving to perfect a triple-and-a-half that his brother, Lalo (the great catcher whose superb work is the secret of no small part of the success of this renowned act), may grasp Alfredo by the ankles instead of the wrists and so spare his injured shoulders. If Alfredo succeeds in accomplishing this feat he will stand absolutely alone in the firmament of trapeze stars and that at an age when many aerialists are considering retiring from their arduous life. Those of us who are privileged to know him personally are fervent in our hope that he succeeds, both for his sake and for the sake of the audiences that have come to watch each year for his performance which for grace, daring, and beauty of execution is unsurpassed. Circuses will not be circuses without the dazzling work of the great and altogether likable Alfredo Codona.

Next we sought out Luisita Leers, the girl who at the age of sixteen was signed by John Ringling, that connoisseur of circus performers, to be announced star on his circus and who now, five years later, is doing much to fill in the yawning gap left by the tragic death of Lillian Leitzel. In her acknowledgement of an introduction, Luisita exhibits much of the same poise that marks her performance high above the hippodrome track as she hangs

Winnie and Con Colleano on Ringling-Barnum lot. Photo taken on 3 August 1933, Baraboo, Wisconsin.



from her trapeze bar by the back of her neck, suspended in space with no net to break her fall. As one converses with her one gleans that her first ambition is to constantly improve herself as a stellar performer, and she constantly chafes because she can exhibit so little of her ability under the canvas in America where acts are cut down to five, six, or seven minutes. She repeatedly tells her listeners that she wishes she might perform for them as she can in



Luisita Leers and Faye Brathen on Ringling-Barnum lot, 29 July 1933, Freeport, Illinois.

Europe in the winter—twirling, turning, twisting, tumbling in almost endless succession of gyrations for thirty and forty minutes, and longer. Luisita's desire to absorb the philosophical teachings of the great thinkers of all ages and all nations is second only to her desire to excel as a trapeze artist. She likewise shares with her good friend Helen Wallenda a critical appreciation of the music of the masters. Little wonder, then, that her performance is characterized by a quiet dignity, a statuesque poise that bespeaks a great, untapped reservoir of energy and ability. In Luisita Leers, marvelous physical strength is combined with a depth of mind and breadth of character that results in that rare woman—one of quiet charm and perfect poise.

There is much more I might relate of my experiences in meeting and coming to know my husband's circus friends. I might tell you of how long it took for me to meet dusky Con Colleano, that reserved, reticent man, who, in the flash and color he puts into his act as an artist of the tight wire would lead one to think him of the type to court publicity rather than one to so quickly seek the privacy of the dressing tent he shares with his pretty, blond-haired wife. I might tell you of the real friendship with Theol Nelson, she who flashes down the length of the hippodrome track with such speed as she turns her backward somersaults that one is scarcely aware of her presence ere she is smilingly taking her bows and tripping through the sawdust again to find a quiet spot where she may write to her little daughter in California. I might tell you about Dorothy Herbert, our own American girl who in her unchallenged superiority as a dauntless horsewoman claims the laurels for the Bluegrass Region. I might tell you about dainty Betty Reif-fenach and of her devoted husband Ruben Olvero, or of Clyde Beatty and his breath-taking escapades with jungle beats, or of many other dwellers in Circusland who have added much to the richness of my life since they slew the Fundamentalists spooks that too long dominated my attitude toward those who wear tights and spangles. This article has exceeded reasonable bounds and I must trust to being afforded another opportunity to tell you more about these cosmopolitan friends of ours who almost daily bring joy to the lives of millions but who do not often make the front page because they live in a well regimented life of personal discipline wherein the divorce court correspondents, and other publicity winners seldom find a place.



# Gollmar Bros. Circus

## Greatest of American Shows

When five Ringling brothers organized an overland circus for 1884, they built upon several years efforts with an indoor variety stage show. Through trials and triumphs they expanded and converted to railroad operation for 1890. It set them on their unprecedented track to the top of the business. The table talk at the family's 1890 Christmas dinner at their parents' home in Baraboo, Wisconsin must have included discussion of their success in the past season and the planned expansion from 18 to 20 cars for 1891.

Over at the Gollmar homestead in Baraboo, the holiday dinner conversation between the brothers eventually turned to circus, too. It was no coincidence that their first cousins were the Ringling brothers. The Gollmar brothers were all employed in various trades, none of which were particularly lucrative. The stories emanating from their cousins must have suggested that traveling shows offered much greater prospects for big money.

Five Gollmars decided to actively participate: Fred; Charles; Ben; Walter; and Jacob, with a sixth, Ed, as a silent investor. Walter was the only one with any prior experience, having traveled with the Ringlings for a year. Unlike their cousins, the Gollmars never set foot in the ring, other than for Walter's role as one-time performer and equestrian director. His counterpart cousin was Al Ringling, both having more or less spark-plugged their brothers interest in organizing a circus. Ed dropped from the circus quickly and Jake died in 1896, leaving four brothers to control the show's destiny.

The season of 1891 marked the start of the Gollmar circus effort, which commenced with fifteen vehicles and 29 hooped animals, a troupe akin to that of their cousins in 1884. It took the Gollmars twelve years to get their overland outfit onto rails, achieved for 1903. An appraisal of their holdings taken on January 1, 1906 placed the value of the their circus at somewhat over \$40,000, one-tenth of which was a single asset, a hippo named Lotus. In addition to the seventeen cars owned outright, they must have leased several more stock cars, making about a 20-car show. Their close management and good luck enabled them to grow to 24 cars by 1910, with blips to 25 in 1913 and 1916, the last season under family ownership. At their zenith they were usually the ninth or tenth largest railroad circus in North America.

The route of the Gollmar show usually took it to the Midwest and Great Plains, dairy farm and wheat belt territory, where honest, hard working people expected and were treated to a good quality circus and a varied menagerie. Going into the fall the Gollmar outfit headed south or southeast, where warmer climates endured when the harvesting started up north.

The Gollmars had the ability to fabricate their own vehicles and likely did so through the early years of their circus. The surviving records of their cousins, the Moeller brothers, confirms that at least in one year repairs were made in their shop in Baraboo. The Gollmars assembled their own new lead bandwagon for 1903, economically having it double as a baggage wagon. That same year they bought a nice Sullivan and Eagle-built steam calliope at the auction of the Forepaugh-Fish Wild West in nearby Janesville,

Wisconsin. A former Ringling ticket wagon went over to the Gollmars, as did several older cages. A big boost from the Ringling camp followed the shelving of the Forepaugh-Sells circus after 1907. The Gollmars bought a couple lesser tableaux (ex-Forepaugh three-tier and one with three square mirrors) from the Ringlings, who also leased them rail cars, and the famed Forepaugh Dancing Eight group of performing elephants. The Gollmars also rented the former Forepaugh-Sells Fighting the Flames apparatus and made it into their 1908 spectacle.

A downturn in the national economy in 1903 hit the Gollmars hard, but they endured, otherwise their outfit might have been one of several from the Midwest that went to circus broker William P. Hall. They finally sold out at the end of 1916 season to James Patterson. The Gollmars walked away with the summer's profits, while Patterson faced his first wintering of a show with only the bankroll from his railroad carnival. Patterson leased the Gollmar name for 1917 and then others did so in 1922 and 1924-1925.

Robert H. Gollmar, Fred's son, became a respected judge in Wisconsin and in 1965 penned a fine tribute to the show, *My Father Owned a Circus*. It remains one of the best insider descriptions of a family-owned railroad circus.

Walter Jr., a Gollmar, who was descended on his mother's side from famed Wisconsin showman Popcorn George Hall, became a bandsman on Seils-Sterling in the 1930s, being the last member of the family active in the circus trade. He lived long enough to transfer first hand knowledge of his family via interviews with Stuart Thayer, Jerry Apps and myself. He was a consummate gentleman, a credit to his family, providing insights back to near the turn of the century.

The Gollmar circus is one of the best documented American shows, with a large number of the firm's accounting ledgers and invoices surviving, along with heralds, couriers, some correspondence, several route books and numerous photographic prints. One set of photos taken at Shawano, Wisconsin on 31 July 1911 provides a comprehensive look at the Gollmar brothers' circus in its heyday. Many of them are among the follow pictures. Surprisingly, less than ten Gollmar posters are known to exist, of which three are unique portrait bills. Some documentation remains with family descendants nearly a century after the Gollmars departed from the field. A very comprehensive account of the Gollmar circus could be composed with relative ease.

A piece of property along Second Avenue at a bend in the Baraboo River served as the Gollmar winter quarters. Two photographs provide an overview of the site, which is otherwise known only from a few detail shots. A plaque was erected at the bridge near the property to commemorate the one-time presence of the circus. The lead bandwagon of 1903 survives today, as do the two ex-Ringling cages that were converted into tableaux. These three and a few parts of the Gollmar steam calliope wagon are at the Circus World Museum. All photos are from the Pfening Archives. Fred Dahlinger Jr.

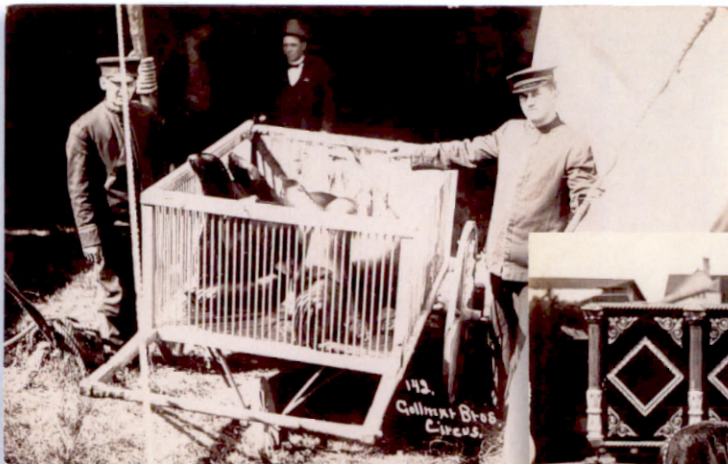




Big show band in front of bandwagon, 1907.



The Avalon Troupe, Bob, Joe, and Lil, acrobats, 1911.



Captain Kent and his trained seals, 1911.



Riders ready for parade, 1911.



Professor Homer Butler's sideshow band, 1911.





Side show opening. Note Oriental dancers on bally platform, cr. 1913.

Emory Stiles, menagerie superintendent, 1911.



Clown band in parade, date unknown.

Men's dressing room, 1909.

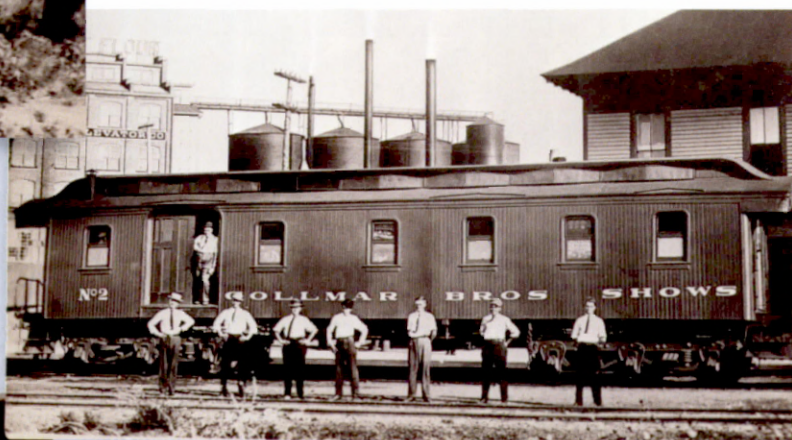


Sideshow bannerline, date unknown.





Side show band ready for parade, 1916.



No. 2 Advance Car, cr. 1910.



Versatile performers, left to right, Bessie Lane, Spanish Rings, Slack Wire, and Carrying Act; Florence Wallet, Roman Rings and Carrying Act; and Vivian McLaire, Double Traps, Slack Wire, and Flying Rings, 1911.



Lotus the hippopotamus in cage, date unknown.

Small tableau wagon in parade, cr. 1909.



Left to right, Maire Enos, Gene Enos, Mary Enos, Iron Jaw and Acrobatic Globe acts, 1911.





Japanese acrobats and equilibrists practicing in back yard, 1911.



Clown band, 1911.



Al Dean, Ringmaster, Race Rider and Menage act, 1911.

Carl Nemo, barrel jumper, clown and hand balancer, 1911.





# The 2010 Circus Historical Society Convention

About eighty of the faithful made the pilgrimage to Mecca, this year located in the birthplace of the modern flying trapeze, Bloomington, Illinois. Activities began on Wednesday night, 21 July,



President Judy Griffin welcomes members to Bloomington. Bob Cline photo.

with a reception at the bar of the Chateau Hotel, the convention headquarters. The hotel, called poor man's Pfister after the elegant Milwaukee hostelry where many members stayed during Great Circus Parades, had an old-world ambiance that was vastly more charming than the sterile, cookie-cutter décor found at most conference locations.

The presentations, the red meat of all Circus Historical Society meetings, began Thursday morning with Dorita and Walter Estes sharing her family's home movies. Since Dorita's father and mother were performers in one of the flying trapeze acts framed by Arthur Concello on the Ringling-Barnum Circus, no one in the audience experienced the foreboding usually associated with watching home movies. The films were, of course, fascinating, made even more so by Mrs. Estes's narration. The Estes concluded their presentation with anecdotes about their own experiences in the circus business, offering many insights into the ill-fated Barnum's Kaleidoscope Circus as well as many pleasant memories of their time working for Allan C. Hill, a wonderful showman who died too young.



Dorita and Walter Estes making their presentation. Bob Cline photo.

The peanut pitch was next. Bloomington is the home town of Beer Nuts, Inc., producers of the snack beloved by generations of barflies. Ward Hall, the last of the great side showmen, gave an enthusiastic and hugely entertaining pitch for the treats. Hall is such a superb talker that he could keep an audience spellbound reading the tax code. A few of the packages contained prize tickets, just like at the circus, except the gifts were ancient circus newspaper ads rather than coloring books or balloons.

After the giddy attendees finally settled down, Janet Davis, a historian at the University of Texas, discussed her research on the history of the animal rights movement, showing its evolution from a nineteenth century movement against mistreatment of animals to today's crusade to stop the use of animals in laboratory experiments, the wearing of fur, and the exhibition of exotic animals, among other nonsense.

Filmmaker Philip Weyland concluded the morning session with a discussion of his plans for an upcoming documentary on the Flying Vazquez. He had come to the meeting in part to interview Miguel and Juan Vazquez, the first duo ever to catch a quadruple somersault.

After lunch the group headed for Milner Library on the campus of Illinois State University in nearby Normal where a number of speakers discussed the circus collections in the Special Collections and Rare Book Department of the library. Fred Pfening III was among them, giving an overview of the circus collections, emphasizing the great book collection, the business records from the Ringling Circus office in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and rarities such as an autographed photo of



Milner Library's Maureen Brunsdale and Steve Gossard kick off Saturday's Flying Trapeze Seminar. Bob Cline photo.

Bill McMillin showed some of the magnificent Kodachrome slides taken by Sverre O. Braathen, who donated his extensive collection to Illinois State. When the presentations were finished the group viewed the library's treasures up close in the Special Collections room where many invaluable documents, such as the 1906 agreement to combine the Carl Hagenbeck Circus and Forepaugh-Sells, were displayed.

The day concluded with the ever-popular CHS auction. Checks signed by the Ringling brothers and material from the John Robinson and Hagenbeck-Wallace Circuses were among the items on the block. Over \$2700 was raised, the most in recent years. Past president Al Stencell conducted the auction with his usual aplomb.

Bob Cline started off Friday with a paper on William P. Hall, dealer in used elephants and used circuses. He shared much new information on the old pirate, culled from court records, the Hall papers, and a close reading of trade publications. The fruits of his labor will appear in the November-December *Bandwagon*. Kim Baston



Bob Cline gave an excellent paper on the life and times of William P. Hall. Bob Cline photo.

was up next, pitch hitting for Peta Tait. She read Tait's essay that emphasized the athleticism necessary to be a first-rate flying



trapeze artist, using insights from Mary Gill of the Flying Waynes to make her points.

Fred Dahlinger concluded the morning with a review of indoor circuses in America before focusing on one of its oddest manifestations, Frank Hall's 1895 indoor water circus that appeared in a specially-built structure in Chicago. Dahlinger detailed the many engineering problems that had to be overcome to handle the water in the arena.

Cherie Valentine began the afternoon by recounting her family's contribution to the art of the flying trapeze, augmenting her comments with slides from family photo albums. Her parents were meticulous record keepers and she shared the income and expenses attendant to having a flying trapeze act on the road. Kim Baston returned, reading a paper by Dr. Jane Mullett on changes in aerial performances on "new wave" circuses starting in the 1970s.

The day's last presentation was a panel discussion on research sources and methods. Moderated by Fred Dahlinger, the participants were Maureen Brunsdale of Milner Library, Deborah Walk of the Ringling Art Museum, and academics Janet Davis and Matt Wittman, from respectively University of Texas and Bard College. Among the subjects covered were getting started, finding a suitable topic, locating source material, using the Internet, and evaluating evidence. Of value to both the veteran investigator and the



The legendary flyer Tony Steele was the banquet speaker. Philip Weyland photo.

novice, this segment was one of the convention's highlights. The staggering amount of information on the Internet on circus was one of many important points that emerged from the discussion.

The annual banquet was held that evening with flying trapeze immortal Tony Steele as the after-dinner speaker. The first person to successfully catch the three-and-a-half somersault, he mesmerized the audience with his account of how he got into the trapeze business, his career in general and specifically how he came to push the envelope of the possible. He even took questions from the audience. Everyone left the banquet with an enhanced knowledge and appreciation of the dedication and skill it takes to be a great performing artist.

The best was saved for last. Steve Gossard opened Saturday's festivities with a quick review of the history of the flying trapeze. He then introduced Miguel and Juan Vazquez of the Flying Vazquez, Tony Steele, Richie Gaona of the Flying Gaonas, Terry Cavaretta St. Jules of the Flying Cavarettas, and Al Light of Florida State University's Flying High Circus, perhaps the greatest assembly of trapeze talent in one place since Alfredo Codona flew



Terry St. Jules on the return to catcher Juan Vazquez during the trapeze demonstration. Darin Basile photo.

alone. Their talks were riveting as they answered audience questions about the nuts and bolts of flying, its risks, the greatest moments in their careers, what motivated them and many others. It was one of the most informative and exciting CHS presentations ever.

Bad weather caused a schedule change that afternoon. Darin Basile's documentary film, *Dreaming in Circus*, a biopic on the life of Tony Steele, was shown in the early afternoon. It featured interviews with Steele and many of his friends and associates, and also included rare films of Steele during his hey-day in the 1960s and 1970s. Needless to say, the film received rave reviews.

The skies cleared later in the afternoon, allowing an exhibition of flying trapeze given on outdoor rigging set up near the Illinois State University campus. Participants included students in the Gamma Phi Circus program at ISU as well as their former teacher Al Light, plus the Vazquez brothers, Richie Gaona, and Terry St. Jules. It was thrilling to see Miguel Vazquez and Terry Cavaretta St. Jules, arguably the finest male and female trapeze artists ever, together on the same platform, and each make a flawless leap to the catcher. It was a historic moment, and a fitting end to an excellent convention. President Judy Griffin did a superb job organizing the event and Maureen Brunsdale and her staff at Milner Library could not have been better hosts.

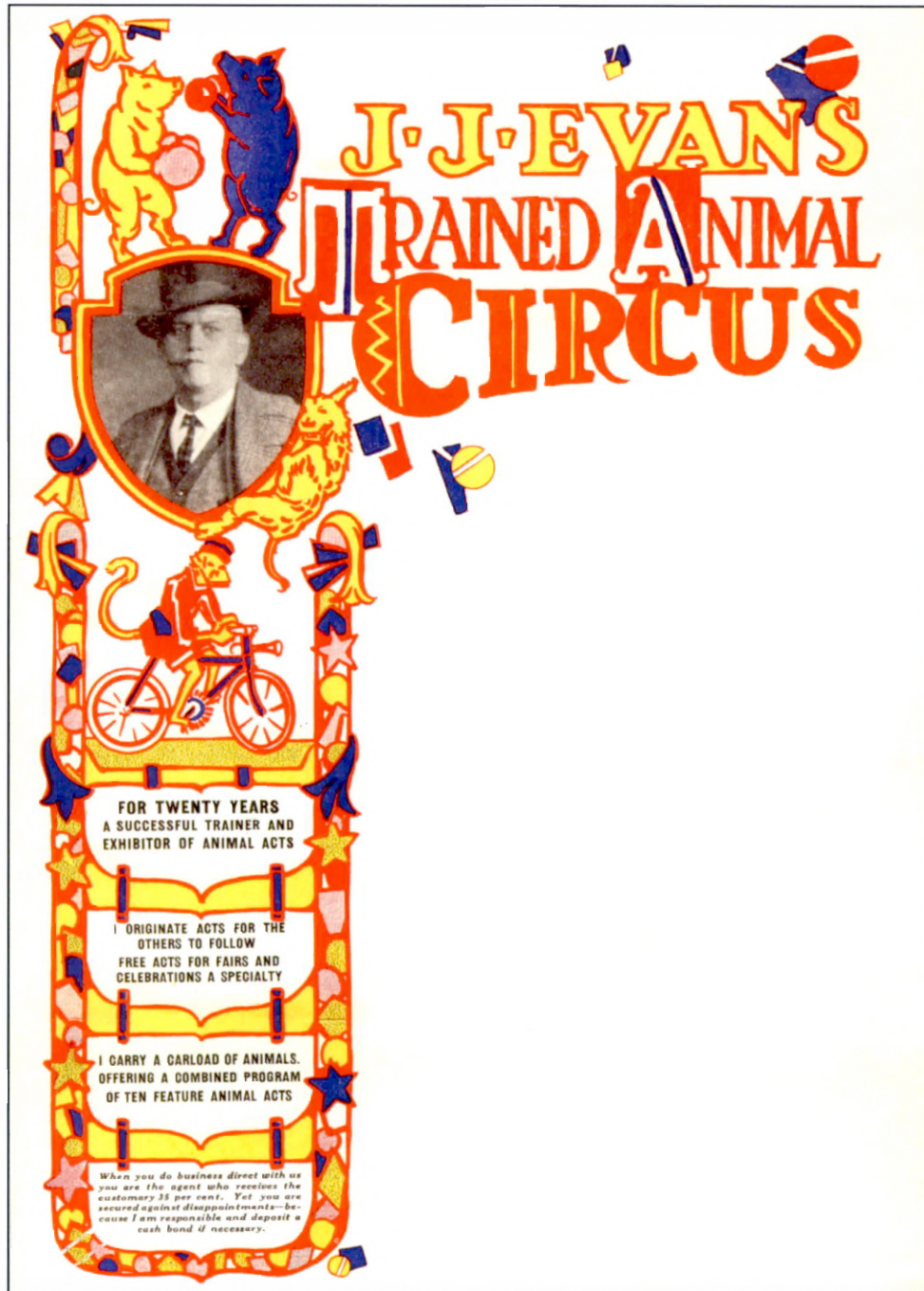
The Board of Trustees decided in their meeting on Sunday morning to hold the 2011 Circus Historical Society convention in Cincinnati, Ohio on 8 to 11 June in conjunction with an exhibition of rare Strobridge circus posters at the Cincinnati Art Museum. More information will be forthcoming. Fred D. Pfening III

Murders' row, left to right, Terry Cavaretta St. Jules, Richie Gaona, Miguel Vazquez, Juan Vazquez, and Tony Steele. Darin Basile photo.





## Bill Kasiska's Letterheads



Come on, admit it. You're just like me. It's been sitting unread on your book shelf for years. You've thought about picking it up dozens of times, but you never quite got to cracking it open. So there it sits, still as the pyramids, gathering dust, and you and me and everybody else has no idea what's between the covers.

I refer, of course, to Sherlock Holmes Evans's *Father Owned a Circus*, published by a vanity press in 1951. I wouldn't have thought of it today had I not stumbled across a letterhead for dad's show, probably dating from the late 1920s.

Let's face it, it's difficult to take anyone seriously whose given name is Sherlock Holmes. Plus, he was generous with the truth in calling his dad's enterprise a circus. It was a back-end show on carnivals, and that's being charitable. That being said, you don't see boxing pigs every day. Fred D. Pfening III





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**AT**

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**MONDAY,**

**JULY**

**26**

**AFTERNOON & NIGHT,**

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Performances commence at 2 and 8, P. M.